

BULLET VS TRIVIUM: TUCK AND HEAFY FACE OFF

METAL HAMMER

NINE INCH NAILS

How The Downward Spiral changed everything

WHILE SHE SLEEPS

Hospital rooms. Car wrecks. Flaming pianos

CHELSEA WOLFE

"Witchcraft has brought me so much joy"

HEAVY METAL PETS

Ponies, ducks, goats... Oh my!

PLUS

DRAGONFORCE

TYPE O NEGATIVE

SUICIDAL TENDENCIES

CATTLE DECAPITATION

BOB VYLAN

AND MORE!

ROB HALFORD: METAL MANIAC. KITTEN LOVER.

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HE'S... A... KIT-TEN LOVERRRRR

WHEN WE HEARD Judas Priest were releasing a new album, we were thrilled. 2018's *Firepower* was a ripping celebration of all that Priest represent, with glossy, modern production and a determined spirit that reflected its title – and *Invincible Shield* continues their unassailable form. We knew we wanted to put them back on the cover... but what should the photos look like?

The answer came while scrolling Rob Halford's Instagram one day. Rob Halford loves kittens. Rob Halford... and kittens!

With The Metal God excited about hang times with his feline friends, we dispatched our intrepid photographer Travis Shinn and investigative reporter Joe Daly to Rob's adopted home of Phoenix, Arizona – without realising they were both allergic to cats. After heroically powering through, they came up with the joyful results you see on these pages.

In celebration of our animal pals, we've also put together a feature on Heavy Metal Pets (see p44), and the *Hammer* team have paid tribute to their furry companions below. Sadly, I haven't got a pet, but if you're asking, my dream is to have a cat, a pair of house rabbits, and a shark.

Stay metal,

ELEANOR GOODMAN
 EDITOR

[@ELEANORGODMAN](https://twitter.com/ELEANORGODMAN)

MEET THE PETS



BETTY
 JONATHAN
 "Lurker extraordinaire; 4am nemeses; regular, blissed-out visitor to the shoulder of love"



FRODO
 VANESSA
 "The world's neediest cat, Frodo demands attention day and night. And gets it, obviously, because THAT FACE."



ZIGGY
 LOUISE
 "My little puppy pal/shadow. Lover of dairy, chicken, going to the pub, cuddles and belly rubs. Dislikes brushes."



SOOTIE
 RICH
 "Sootie is not actually my cat. He is, however, a persistent, very welcome – and fuzzy – frequent home invader."



BOB & MONKEY
 DAVE
 "The Demon Twins of North London, forever stalking the streets for human souls to drain. Aka Bob and Monkey."

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SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER



34 JUDAS PRIEST



10 DRAGONFORCE



14 NEW YEARS DAY

CONT

FRONT ROW

- 8 How London's RAVEN RECORDS is becoming a community hub.
- 10 DRAGONFORCE shredder Herman Li answers your killer questions.
- 14 The records that shaped Ash Costello from NEW YEARS DAY.
- 15 In the studio with melancholic power-prog Swedes EVERGREY.
- 16 From shunning celebrity to undergoing three back surgeries, SUICIDAL TENDENCIES man Mike Muir reveals his Life Lessons.
- 20 The story behind TYPE O NEGATIVE's *I Don't Wanna Be Me*.
- 26 Meet Dutch goths BLACKBRIAR.

FEATURES

- 34 With ripping new JUDAS PRIEST album *Invincible Shield* on the way, we sat down with Rob Halford (and some kittens) for a heart-to-heart.
- 44 From dogs to ducks, say hello to the HEAVY METAL PETS!
- 50 BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE's Matt Tuck and TRIVIUM's Matt Heafy face off.
- 58 Thirty years on, we revisit NINE INCH NAILS' incredible masterpiece, *The Downward Spiral*.
- 64 Grab your broomstick as we go to LA to explore CHELSEA WOLFE's witchy side.



70 BOB VYLAN



87 BLIND CHANNEL



50 BULLET + TRIVIUM



64 CHELSEA WOLFE

ENTS

**SUBSCRIBE
NOW & SAVE**

Head to p.32
for details

70 Why **BOB VYLAN**'s heavy grime-punk fusion is vital.

74 We head North to see **WHILE SHE SLEEPS** set a piano on fire.

ALBUMS

84 **JUDAS PRIEST** reaffirm their status as Metal Gods.

86 **WHILE SHE SLEEPS** continue their rise up metalcore's ranks.

90 Power metal maniacs **DRAGONFORCE** get goofy.

92 Industrial agitators **MINISTRY** mix thrills and social ills.

93 **NEW YEARS DAY** bring something old and something new.

95 Extreme metal overlords **VLTIMAS** pile on the pomp.

LIVES

96 **BRING ME THE HORIZON** claim metalcore's throne in Manchester.

99 **BURY TOMORROW** prove their bona fides in Leeds.

100 Hard rockers **SOUTH OF SALEM** host in their hometown.

101 A league of legends celebrates 10 years of **METAL ALLEGIANCE**.

102 Deathcore brutes **MALEVOLENCE** bring the aggro to Cardiff.

103 **PERIPHERY** light up London's Roundhouse.



96 BRING ME THE HORIZON



74 WHILE SHE SLEEPS





THE BIG PICTURE

BIG TINGS

UK RAGGA METALLERS Skindred took home Best Alternative Music Act at the 2024 MOBO (Music Of Black Origin) Awards, which was held at Sheffield's Utilita Arena on February 7. Although the MOBO Awards have been going since 1996, the Best Alternative Music Act category was only introduced in 2022, and won that year by Bob Vylan. As there were no MOBO Awards in 2023, Skindred are only the second act to receive the prize, and beat off competition from the likes of ALT BLK ERA, Kid Bookie and Arlo Parks.

The award comes off the back of a string of recent achievements for Newport's finest, including arena support slots with Kiss on their final tour and a career-best chart position for *Smile*, which reached No.2 on the UK's Official Albums Chart.

In an interview after receiving their award, frontman Benji Webbe admitted the band had been anxious about the nomination, but were elated to win.

"We've been making music which is about bringing people together for a long time," he explained. "For us, this is a great opportunity to bring more people to us."

Later this month, Skindred will play London's Wembley Arena – their biggest headline show to date. **H**



THE HOT TOPIC

RAVEN RECORDS TAKES FLIGHT

A new record shop and non-alcoholic bar has opened in London – and its owners want to offer community support for metalheads beyond the capital

WORDS: MATT MILLS

CAMDEN HAS LONG had a reputation for being London's most metal area. From legendary music venues like The Underworld, the Electric Ballroom and the Roundhouse, to beloved bars such as The Dev and The Black Heart, it's a cornerstone of nightlife for any local – or visitor – who loves their music heavy. Raven Records is the newest – and perhaps most innovative – fixture of the community, offering not only an impressive selection of kickass records, but a fully stocked non-alcoholic bar and café.

"I'm a recovering alcoholic," explains owner Ben Dean, who opened Raven Records with his fiancée, Chloe Marlow, in late 2023. "I got into Alcoholics Anonymous at the age of 24, so I'm over 16 years now without a drink, but I find it a bit of a struggle in terms of going out. A lot of the time, in metal bars, you're limited to Coke, lemonade, Red Bull or water. We're not judging people on how they drink. It's just that, for me, I can't drink, and I wanted to create a place where I'm comfortable with everything on offer."

"WE NEED MORE PEOPLE TO SAY, 'I'M SOBER. IT DOESN'T MAKE ME LESS OF A METAL FAN'"

Comfort is paramount to what Raven Records provides – Ben and Chloe hope to cultivate a safe social space for metalheads and alternative music fans of all stripes. Their shop stocks albums from 80s glam metallers Cinderella to Greek black metallers Rotting Christ, and everything in between. But while their range of music is undoubtedly impressive, so is the fact that there's a fully stocked 0% alcohol bar, offering everything from IPAs and ciders to non-alcoholic whisky.

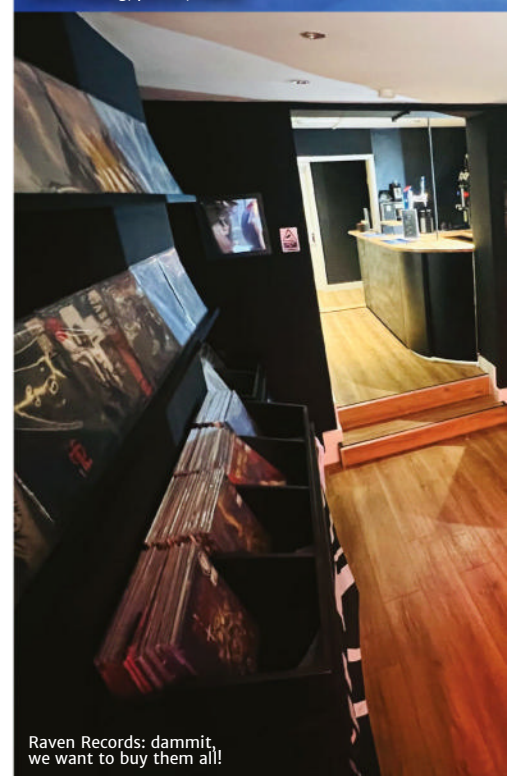
And if you want something warmer? Raven Records also sells an array of metal-inspired hot drinks, including some decidedly kvlt coffee blends. As well as "ultra dark roasts" from Black Coffee Worship (a company formed by a "Swedish-born, Liverpool-residing goth"), Raven Records is one of only two places in the UK where you can taste three speciality coffees masterminded by black/death metal heretics Behemoth.

"There's also a hairdresser who has them imported," says Chloe. "But you can't just go in and buy some."

Ben and Chloe met on a dating app in September 2021. Both have a deep-rooted love for metal, and while Chloe enjoys the melodic and brutal stuff alike, Ben's music tastes have only grown more and more extreme. They also share a history of working in the music industry, he as an A&R representative and she as a DJ. So when it came to orchestrating a proposal,



Extra-strong, please, Chloe!



Raven Records: dammit, we want to buy them all!

Ben did it in the most metal way possible: during Behemoth's set at 2023's Download Festival.

"I went crowdsurfing dressed as a mermaid," Ben remembers fondly.

"I was hoping I'd see him on the big screen," laughs Chloe, "but I'm quite short, so I didn't see a thing!"

The seed for Raven Records was planted in November 2022. "I said to Ben that I'd been wanting to set up a shop for a while," Chloe says. "He went, 'I also want to set up a shop – this is really cool! Let's have a think about it and see if we can make it work.' We combined our two ideas, our two concepts, together."

The search for a physical location took some time, however. Ben and Chloe initially eyed a shop near Shepherd's Bush, but the deal fell through. They also scouted out



Now THAT is a decent selection of 0% drinks!



Corvid couple: Ben Dean and Chloe Marlow

a former kebab place in Tufnell Park, which Chloe reflects on as “the grimmest thing ever”.

“I’m never eating takeaway kebabs again for the rest of my life,” she laughs.

Eventually, the spot at 24 Camden Road became available, putting them at the heart of the heavy community. The record-selling, bar and café components are all up and running, although there’s still room to expand. Ben and Chloe are planning to open up the decidedly Helvete-like space downstairs, so they can host tarot readings, artist signings and more.

In the longer term, the aspiration is for Raven Records to extend its influence beyond Camden and into the wider metal scene. Their ultimate goal is to set up shop at UK festivals to offer pastoral care, whether to metal fans who are trying to quit drinking, or

those who just need to take a break. Ben also hopes that Raven Records will help change people’s perceptions about drinking on a night out.

“This should be a place where people can come and socialise and have a chat without having to lubricate themselves with alcohol, which I think a lot of society does at the moment,” he says. “I found Rob Halford, when he talked about being 38 years sober recently, really inspirational. I think we need more people that can stick the flag in the ground and say, ‘I’m sober, and that doesn’t make me less of a metal fan.’” **H**

FIND OUT MORE AT RAVENRECORDSHOP.COM. FOR SUPPORT WITH ALCOHOL ADDICTION, VISIT ALCOHOLICS-ANONYMOUS.ORG.UK

10 THINGS WE LEARNED THIS MONTH

What’s been blowing our tiny brains

EUROVISION HAS GONE NU GEN

Bambie Thug will head to Sweden to represent Ireland at the song contest, with the brilliantly bizarre *Doomsday Blue*.

MR. BUNGE ARE TOURING THE UK

Mike Patton and co. are coming back to the UK in June for their first UK shows in 24 years, including an appearance at Download festival.

SLEEP TOKEN ARE AN (EVEN BIGGER) ARENA BAND

They’ll tour the UK in November. Considering how fast they sold out their one-off Wembley show last year, we can’t say we’re surprised.

KERRY KING HAS RETURNED!

He released his first solo single, *Idle Hands*. Of course, it’s thrashy AF.

THERAPY? HAVE ANNOUNCED A WORLD TOUR

It will celebrate the 30th anniversary of their million-selling breakthrough album, *Troublegum*.



Bambie Thug is Eurovision-bound!

AND THE WILDHEARTS ARE BACK! (SORT OF)

Britain’s most combustible band are playing a “world-exclusive” show in London on June 6, with an almost entirely new line-up.

A THRASH METAL DRUMMER COST ELON MUSK \$56 BILLION

Former Dawn Of Correction sticksman Richard Tornetta won a huge lawsuit against the Tesla CEO.

OZZY OSBOURNE IS PLANNING FAREWELL SHOWS IN BIRMINGHAM

That’s according to his wife and manager, Sharon Osbourne.

THERE’S A FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN FOR RUSS RUSSELL

The producer’s cancer is in remission and he’s recovering from treatment. Visit bit.ly/russrussell

SPIRITBOX ARE WORKING WITH JORDAN FISH

Whatever they’re doing, it’ll be massive!



HOW LONG WILL YOU BE ABLE TO PLAY THIS FAST?

Shred legend Herman Li faces down your questions on the legacy of *Guitar Hero*, the rise of Polyphia and, erm, quests...

WORDS: CHRIS CHANTLER • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

WHEN DRAGONFORCE UNVEILED their hypersonic, digit-damaging vision of power metal back in 2003, nobody could have predicted that they'd kickstart a generational shift in the genre as young fans discovered the joys of cheesy, bombastic tales of swords'n'sorcery. Nor could they have predicted that Dragonforce would become a household name thanks to the inclusion of *Through The Fire And Flames* on *Guitar Hero*. Two decades on, the Dragonforce legions have been summoned to battle once more on jubilant new album *Warp Speed Warriors*. We tracked down founding axe hero Herman Li to a studio in LA to answer your burning questions.

Should or shouldn't one flex the thumb and forefinger while playing solo or lead?

Sepsiss, Facebook

"I'm not sure what that means! But if you want to pretend that you're a good guitar player, or at least look confident, your fingers have to be nicely angled and bent into kind of a circle. People who aren't so confident technically will have kind of flappy fingers when they're doing a lead. Usually, a really good guitarist will use that technique if they need to, but not all the time."

Could [Polyphia guitarist] Tim Henson play for Dragonforce?

Nick Harmer, Twitter

"I did a livestream a couple of years ago for RazerCon, a gaming accessory

company showcase, and I had Tim Henson do *Cry Thunder* and *Through The Fire And Flames* as a three-way guitar battle with me and [Animals As Leaders'] Tosin Abasi. I'd love to have Tim come in and do a tour with Dragonforce, wouldn't that be fun! He's totally capable of doing it, and he's a really great guy."

What do you find the hardest part about touring?

Nobody_Guitar, Instagram

"Now, the hardest part of touring is having the time to not do anything! I'm not a musician who just sits around waiting to be fed. I'm busy the whole day. I wake up and see what's going on, talk to all the crew, check out the guitars. I'm involved with the stage production, the audio... I want to make sure the show looks and sounds as good as possible. We do livestreaming

with nine cameras, so I check out the computers, the video screens and Sam [Totman, guitars] builds the stage props. It's a full-on show."

Hammer: Dragonforce used to be renowned for a bit of boozing before a show – does that still happen?

"That's all gone now. We just don't have time! We meet the fans for the VIP package, and it's not just like 'sign, bye, ignore', we actually like to have a little conversation and a laugh with them. We still enjoy hanging out with friends at the party after the show, but before the show we're busy all the time."

How important were games like *Guitar Hero* for getting people into metal?

Ed Timms, email

"*Guitar Hero* was very important for metal – not just for Dragonforce, but all guitar-driven music. With guitar music, the waves come and go; it's popular, then it's not popular, it's hard to say why. But *Guitar Hero* definitely got a young generation to hear guitars, and gave them a choice actually, between what they hear on the radio and what they don't hear on the radio. Tim Henson is an example from that generation; he played *Guitar Hero* as a kid, now he's a guitar hero himself!"

Why haven't Dragonforce hired a new keyboardist?

Jonathan Carr, Facebook

"Because having someone in the band is almost like a marriage. You're





**“IF YOU WANT TO
SEE DRAGONFORCE
LIVE, YOU BETTER
COME NOW – THIS
IS NOT FOREVER!”**

Herman Li: no plastic
instruments in sight

seeing them all the time on tour, you're living with them, you're in the same room every day. It's not that easy to find someone who fits the music, who has the drive, and who can handle all this touring. Being away from home for so long, that's a lot to ask of someone. They have to really want to do it. Sometimes people think they want it, but when they get on tour, they're like, 'Shit, this isn't what I expected!' That's why you see so many people quitting bands and deciding to do something else. I'm happy to have a full-time keyboard player back in the band when we have found someone special, but until then we had Coen Janssen from Epica playing keyboards on our album, so..."

How many scars are on those fingers from going so damned fast?

Down The Nails, Twitter

"None on my fingers, but I fell offstage on our last tour of America; I really hurt my leg and my teeth. I'm having to go to physiotherapy for my left leg. I fucked it up mid-tour, and kept doing the shows like nothing was happening because the show must go on. Now I'm doing therapy to get this leg ready for the next tour – it's been going on for months. But that's the danger of a Dragonforce show – we don't do boring shows!"

How old can you get while still playing at this speed?

Clan X (The Clanx), email

"I don't know... Maybe another 10, 15 years? I'm being realistic. Playing a Dragonforce set is not easy, it asks a lot of you. It's not like we can pace ourselves – you know, some bands can play forever, right? But if you want to see Dragonforce live, you better come now, I'm telling you. This is not forever."

Where does the creativity for the extensively long guitar solos come from?

Igjournalism, Instagram

"I don't think I'm the smartest guy in the room. I'm definitely not the best guitar player – I'm not in the top thousand in this world. But I want to get better. That's how the creativity came around, because the amount of knowledge in the guitar world is unlimited – so I'm always learning."

"I'M NOT IN THE TOP THOUSAND GUITARISTS IN THE WORLD – I WANT TO GET BETTER"



Herman Li is ridiculously modest about his playing. Has he seen Dragonforce?!

Considering your origins, how does it feel seeing power metal bands playing massive venues these days?

Elliot Rouse, email

"It is a great thing. When we started, we thought we'd already missed the boat. I can remember what it was like back then in the UK. I remember going to see Stratovarius – one of the biggest PM bands of the time – at the [500-capacity] Camden Underworld. But we've just had our biggest US tour ever in our career, I never thought this could happen – this was bigger than the *Through The Fire And Flames* era in America. And to see other bands doing so great, friends of ours like Sabaton and Powerwolf, it's awesome."

What Dragonforce album are you most proud of?

Jerseypiper77, Twitter

"I'd say I had the same feeling when we finished [2019's] *Extreme Power Metal* as I did when we finished [2004's] *Sonic Firestorm*. I felt really good about it, like we'd done something that I could really be proud of, something we could go out there and tour for a long time. There was no pressure, and it was a great album."

Who were your biggest inspirations in the development of your melodic, shredding, neo-classical style?

Septamus2000, Instagram

"If you listen to just one guitar player you end up sounding like them, so it's got to be a collective of as many guitar players as possible. Obviously, I love lead players, so Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Tony MacAlpine, those are my top favourites, along with Marty Friedman – you can't go wrong with those guys. The solos that got me into guitars were

Richie Sambora's on Bon Jovi songs, because they're so memorable and so melodic. There are not many stadium concerts where you hear people singing the guitar solos. I saw Bon Jovi at Wembley Stadium, and every time he played a solo people would sing it or hum along to it. Even Vai and Satriani can't make that happen!"

What's the most starstruck you've ever been?

Phil Walker, email

"I went to see Mr. Big at Shepherd's Bush Empire in 2011, and Brian May was there. Everyone wanted to speak to him, everyone was onto him, and I was like, 'Obviously I don't want to annoy Brian May.' I know what it's like to be a guitar player at a show, people pulling your ear off. Then, suddenly, he came up to me and said, 'Hey Herman, how's it going?' What the fuck?! Brian May came and spoke to me! He likes Dragonforce! That was a shocker for me!"

What is your quest?

Christopher Lee Seaman, Facebook

"To be true to myself, and keep doing what I love for as long as possible. I will stop if I no longer enjoy it, I won't fake it. Sam and I said it since the beginning: when we don't want to do this anymore, we'll hang it up, we won't do it forever. So everything we do, we love." **H**

WARP SPEED WARRIORS IS OUT ON MARCH 15 VIA NAPALM. DRAGONFORCE'S UK TOUR WITH AMARANTHE STARTS MARCH 22 IN BRISTOL

Liquid Death
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TAYLOR

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SCENE QUEEN
OF MICE & MEN
HANABIE

TOM MORELLO
SLAUGHTER TO PREVAIL
KARNIVOOL
BLEED FROM WITHIN
ALIEN WEAPONRY
ASINHELL HERIOT

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FACTORY**

*The Black
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MAKE THEM SUFFER
SCOWL SPEED
ITHACA ZULU
THE CALLOUS DAOBOYS
URNE FROZEMODE DEFECTS

DYING FETUS
ALPHA WOLF NE OBLIVISCARIS
DYING WISH GEL
GUILT TRIP CALVA LOUISE
ALT BLK ERA KNIFE BRIDE
CELESTIAL SANCTUARY

ERRA FIT FOR A KING
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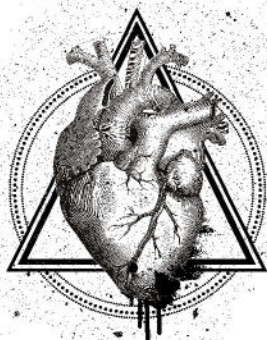
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THE SLAYLIST

ASH COSTELLO

From rock'n'roll to emo and industrial, here's how the New Years Day vocalist has evolved

WORDS: JON GARCIA • PICTURES: MATT AKANA

"BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY BY QUEEN was my first taste of what rock'n'roll was. My parents took me to see *Wayne's World* and the scene where they headbang... I found who I am in that scene! That was my first introduction to songwriting, really. I tend to gravitate more towards bands that have an epic sound, and when bands have a grand, almost theatre-like aspect I fall in love instantly. Then, when I heard *Just A Girl* and saw **NO DOUBT** perform, it was like the sunbeams came down and the angels sang. I saw a woman onstage that looked very girly but was kicking ass. I was like, 'That's what I want to be.' It made me feel very empowered very young.

"I would stay up late watching *MTV After Hours*, where they would play the more risqué music videos. This is where I saw **NINE INCH NAILS'** *Closer* and **TOOL's** *Stinkfist*. That changed my life, like, almost in one night – especially *Closer*. It was like this world opened up of this dark, heavy, disturbing lyrical and visual content that completely shifted me to something way more sinister. I felt like I was watching something I wasn't allowed to be watching. I loved that feeling, and not only did I pursue that feeling in music from then on, it made me shift into what I wanted to be as an artist.

"I was given *Three Cheers For Sweet Revenge* by **MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE** on a burned CD and the first song I connected with on that album was *I'm Not Okay (I Promise)*. It was so chaotic, so anthemic, and the lyrics were so to the point. I fell in love with that lyrical style. That's when I started dyeing my hair red and wearing red eyeshadow. That's where that all started developing. **THE USED's** *The Taste Of Ink* became an anthem to me. It really made me

"I WANTED TO BE DAVEY HAVOK FROM AFI"

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To hear Ash's choices, visit tinyurl.com/NewYearsSlaylist

feel like I could do anything. I would sing that on the way to a show when I was going to perform, on the way to recording, songwriting sessions... It made me feel invincible.

"I don't even know where to begin with *Girl's Not Grey* by **AFI**. *Sing The Sorrow* is probably the most important album in my life. I wouldn't be the singer, the artist, *anything* without that album. I always try to remember that when we're writing new music – to take risks and do something out of the box and surprise people. That's what AFI taught me. My first time watching Davey Havok perform I wanted to be him so bad, more than I've ever wanted to be any other frontperson. He was flawless. Ever since that moment and to this day before I go onstage, I think, 'Just be Davey Havok.'

"I didn't really deep-dive into **RAMMSTEIN** until I discovered *Sonne*, and I still reference that song in songwriting sessions. It's one of the most flawlessly written songs. Structurally, sonically, the guitar tones and the feeling it gives me, the video that went with it... But for me it was the guitar riff that I have tried to emulate in so many songs of ours. It shifted me to a heavier tone as far as New Years Day's music. *Fucking Hostile* is my favourite **PANTERA** song. We ended up covering it and still play it to this day. Whenever I wake up on tour, the part of the day I look forward to is getting onstage and playing *Fucking Hostile*. We got to play it in front of [late drummer] Vinnie Paul. We got his blessing and he loved it, so I feel very honoured.

"Before I ever met **IN THIS MOMENT**, we were signed to the same label. I was at the office one day, and they played me the video for *Blood*, and I was an instant fan. I thought the song was so iconic and Maria Brink looked iconic. I thought she was so bold and so brave. I wanted to embody that in myself and it really pushed me forward in my own music. She's an incredible visionary." **H**

NEW YEARS DAY'S HALF BLACK HEART IS OUT NOW VIA CENTURY MEDIA

Ash Costello: she's come a long way since discovering Queen



IN THE STUDIO

EVERGREY

After 30 years of melancholic power-prog, the Swedes are looking on the bright side of life with album #14

WORDS: PAUL TRAVERS

OVER THE PAST decade, Evergrey have had a creative resurgence. After nearly falling apart following 2011's *Glorious Collision* album, the Swedes regrouped, refocused and began perhaps the most industrious stage of their lengthy career. Currently putting the finishing touches to their fourth album in just five years, they're also juggling numerous side- and solo projects, with singer/guitarist Tom S. Englund alone having put out two albums (with *Redemption* and *Silent Skies*) in 2023. *Hammer* caught up with the frontman to find out why coming back to Evergrey always feels so special.

How's the new album shaping up?

"Really well. We decided we wanted to try out a new mixing engineer for this album and had our minds set on Adam 'Nolly' Getgood [Periphery]. Myself and Jonas [Ek Dahl, drums] are still producing, but we wanted to get him in from the start and help set the sound. We had just purchased an old studio that we had started to refurbish, so he came out and lived in a little cottage in Sweden. We'd hang and have barbecues at night and set sounds during the day."

Did having your own studio make a difference?

"For now we're just calling it Evergrey HQ, but it used to be Bohus Sound Recording. ABBA have worked there and a lot of old-school rock bands. It's a classic place in that sense, which added to the vibe and the idea that we wanted it to sound very organic. There are no samples, nothing is sound



Evergrey is a power-prog military operation

replaced, and we play everything all the way through. Today anybody can sound like a machine, but we wanted to do this one more old school."

Fans submitted vocal parts for the track *One Heart*. How did it turn out?

"That idea was a collaboration with a Swedish rock magazine. In the beginning I didn't feel like I could make something out of it without making it really corny, but I started thinking about what it was that actually brings us together and makes us feel that belonging. I wrote this thing that in my head sounded like a mix of W.A.S.P. and *Youth Gone Wild* by Skid Row. It had gang vocals and it turned out really well."

You said in a fan Q&A that the new album has a 'fresher' feel. What do you mean by that?

"Every band says, 'Oh it's the darkest, the heaviest, the coolest thing we've ever made.' What are we going to say on our 14th album? Ha ha ha! I think it's an album that's going to bring you through the light and the darkness. It's very diverse in that respect and maybe a bit lighter, to be honest. On this album, Johan [Niemann, bass] wrote most of the basic foundations for all of the

songs, which gave us a blank sheet in a sense, because we never started that way before. It was always me and Jonas writing, and then people contributing to what we had done. This time Johan gave us 400 song ideas to work with! We bought him a computer and a music programmer last year and now that's all he does. The lazy bastard, he should have done that 20 years ago!"

Your lyrics seem to have become less depressive over the years. Is this also a lighter album in that respect?

"I'm in a different place in my life. Those things that I'd been through that affected my lyrics are always going to be there, but they're a bit more distant now. I'm writing from the perspective that I'm telling you, no matter what you think now, that there is a way out."

With all the members' projects, do you have to carve out time for Evergrey and run it like a military operation?

"Yes, but I work better that way. We just celebrated 30 years, and going through demos from 1993 and old photos, it's mind-boggling to still be able to do this. I'm extremely excited every time to go in and make a new album and I feel like I can do this for another 30 years." **H**

EVERGREY'S NEW ALBUM IS EXPECTED LATER THIS YEAR. THE BAND PLAY BLOODSTOCK FESTIVAL IN AUGUST

THE FACTS

ALBUM:
14

PRODUCER:
Tom S. Englund
and Jonas Ek Dahl

STUDIO:
Evergrey HQ,
Kungälv, Sweden

EXPECT:
A lighter take
on the Swedes'
melancholic
prog-power sound



BORN IN VENICE, Los Angeles, and introduced to the world of music by his famous skateboarding brother Jim, Mike Muir has been one of the most unique voices in thrash, hardcore and punk since he formed Suicidal Tendencies at the age of 17, in 1980. Of course, they went on to become one of the most influential names in the world of crossover, and they're still going strong 44 years down the line.

"I know that there are a lot of people that don't like me!" the notoriously outspoken frontman chuckles, as we sit down to quiz him on what he's learned over the years. Some folks may not, Mike, but as we sit and chat about everything from celebrity culture to long-running side-project Infectious Grooves (featuring Rob Trujillo, current Metallica four-stringer and formerly of ST), it's safe to say we're not one of them.

IT'S GOOD TO HAVE A ROLE MODEL

"Probably the biggest influence on my music tastes was my brother, because he was five years older than me. For Christmas he'd give me Black Sabbath or something. Then I'd try to play the record, and he'd try to beat me up for playing his records! I'd say, 'You gave it to me for Christmas!' 'Alright... well, don't scratch it.' He got into progressively heavier music and then one day he comes in, his hair shaved off and dyed black, and it's like, 'What the hell happened to you?'"

IT'S NOT ABOUT WHAT'S ON THE TIN, IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

"When I went to the first punk show with my brother, I go, 'Dude, this is the best thing I've ever been to!' I was just out there, jumping and going crazy. It was literally moving me, you know? I couldn't wait for the next show, but when I did go it was absolutely horrendous. I realised it's not punk the genre that's great, it has to be the music. It's not the title, it's what the actual substance is."

FORM A BAND FOR FUN, NOT FOR A CAREER

"We were really lucky because we started practising in the kitchen and we didn't think it was like a band, we were just having fun. I make the analogy a lot of times: you got your football – or soccer as we call it – and you play it in the park. You don't think you're going to be in the World Cup, you know what I mean? It's just fun. That was what we did. Someone had a guitar, another friend lived in an apartment – his mom said, 'You gotta get these drums out because they're gonna kick us out!' So it was like, 'Hey, bring your drums over here.' We weren't following a path. I see a lot of

people and they go, 'Can you give my kid advice?' I always hate that. They want to be like some huge band, play in front of thousands of people, have everybody idolise them, and I go, 'I'm the wrong person to talk to you.'"

DON'T JUDGE OTHER PEOPLE'S MUSIC TASTES

"Music is kind of like food. If I'm eating something and someone goes, 'What are you eating?' and I'm like, 'pad thai noodles', and they go, 'Oh that's disgusting. How could you



LIFE LESSONS

MIKE MUIR

The Suicidal Tendencies frontman on delicious noodles, not following trends and why he wouldn't want to be in Metallica or Guns N' Roses

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

eat that?' It's like, 'What do you mean it's disgusting? Fuck you! I like it, I eat it!' Music's kind of like that. It's not something you negotiate, it's something that moves you."

CHANGE IS GOOD, EVEN IF PEOPLE DON'T ALWAYS LIKE IT

"Early on in Suicidal's career, we found that we started to get magazines talking crap about

us. You know, we were the worst band, the biggest assholes... all those things. We just didn't fit in. When the first [and self-titled] record came out [in 1983], people were saying how terrible it was. Then four years later, the irony is, when we did our second record [*Join The Army*], they were talking about how great the first record was and how terrible the second one was! Then when we did [our third album in 1988] *How Will I Laugh Tomorrow When I Can't Even Smile Today*, they said, 'Oh my God, they did two classics and now they've done this terrible record!' We realised that people can't handle change. But when you're doing something that you feel really impassioned about, and you don't want to repeat things, you have to stick to it, even if people don't understand it."

MUSIC DOESN'T NEED A UNIFORM

"One of the quote 'big' punk bands when we first started off said to me, 'Mike, you guys got a label. You could do good, but you're never going to do anything dressed like that!' And I'm looking at him, with the leather and eyeliner and all this stuff, and I'm thinking, 'I gotta dress up for shows or whatever, to fit into your thing?' Put on your uniform, so to speak. That's not my uniform, you know? I listened to the music and that's what the most important thing was for me."

I REALLY DON'T WANT TO BE A CELEBRITY

"Right now we're doing the Infectious Grooves thing with Robert Trujillo. Last year we did a Suicidal Tendencies show with Robert in Mexico where he filled in because Tye, his son who is our bass player, couldn't do it. It wasn't announced, but people found out fast. He's in Mexico, and you know, Metallica is fucking huge everywhere, but extra-huge there because Robert's like a saint. It's insane! Robert's the nicest person I know, and I don't know how he does it, because people fucking suck. They're just so incredibly demanding and insulting. I feel very fortunate people just go, 'Hey Mike' to me. We went out with Metallica and Guns N' Roses, and I'm glad we did it. It was a great experience but tolerating that level of intrusion... it's just not who I am, you know?"

'TASTEMAKERS' ARE NOT ALWAYS RIGHT

"Rodney on the ROQ [US DJ Rodney Bingenheimer] played [1983 debut single] *Institutionalized* and said to one of the other top DJs, 'You've got to play this song, just play it!' They played it and the phones lit up. It was becoming the most requested song. But one of the people at the top said, 'This isn't music. We can't

"I GOT A CALL ASKING IF I'D BE ON MIAMI VICE... I THOUGHT IT WAS A PRANK!"



Mike Muir: a crossover legend with no time for bullshit

Mike gives the finger to mediocrity

“THERE’S NOTHING WORSE THAN WATCHING AN OLD BAND GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS”

play that! We have a formula.’ Blah, blah, blah! It’s funny, because they’re supposed to be alternative! A little while later I went into a 7-Eleven convenience store and they were playing KROQ, and *Institutionalized* came on, and there were some older college chicks there. I thought they were gonna freak out and tell them to turn the fucking radio off! I’m watching to see people’s reaction, to see if a riot breaks out or whatever, and they were just like, ‘You hear this? I like it!’ I was like, ‘What the fuck?’ So, the supposed tastemakers got it wrong.”

LIFE IS FULL OF SURPRISES

“So, I got a call and they say, ‘We’re from [long-running 80s crime drama] *Miami Vice* and we would like to have you on an episode.’ My first instinct was that it was one of my friends pranking me, so I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, sure! How’s [star of the show] Don Johnson doing?’ I thought it was a joke! They told me they were gonna send over a car, so what’s the address? I’m just playing along and then this town car pulls up and they’re like, ‘This is this what we need you to sign.’ I’m thinking, ‘Wait a second... this is a whole hell lot of trouble for some kids from the hood... This is legit!’ Ha ha ha!”

DON’T PRETEND TO BE COOL

“It’s funny, because *Miami Vice* was the most popular show on TV back then, but not that popular with the punks. We went out there, we did it, and then when it was on afterwards, I started getting all these calls from people like, ‘Dude, are you on *Miami Vice*?!’ I was like, ‘Well, how would you know that?’ And they’re like, ‘Oh... I don’t watch it... but I was just home.’ Hmm... you just happened to be home on a Friday night? Sure! Ha ha ha!”

SWEAT DON’T LIE

“I was watching some band once, and they just looked old and beat up, like they did not want to be there. You could sense the misery. I went to my friend, ‘There’s nothing worse than watching an old punk band go through the motions.’ That always stuck out for me. My dad always said, ‘There might be an easier or better way, but sweat don’t lie.’ Like I said, music should move you. The music I love moved me, whether physically or mentally. I’ve had three back surgeries, been bashed about, all that type of stuff, but if I don’t love Suicidal anymore, it’s going to be very evident, and I’ll be gone.” **H**

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THE STORY BEHIND I DON'T WANNA BE ME TYPE O NEGATIVE

The goth metal foursome's final single with Roadrunner Records became one of their most enduring anthems

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

ON NOVEMBER 9, 1995, Type O Negative's *Bloody Kisses* became the first album released by Roadrunner Records to achieve gold certification in the US. Released two years earlier, the album's fusion of doom metal, goth and hardcore had turned the band into stars of the 90s metal scene, and their six-foot-eight frontman, Peter Steele, was cemented as a talismanic icon. But their fortunes wouldn't last.

"We always had a very negative tint on everything," shrugs guitarist Kenny Hickey. "We never patted ourselves on the back and there weren't words of encouragement. Every time we came off tour it felt like, 'Well, that's it – better get a job.'"

Although they'd always maintained an air of pervasive pessimism – proudly adopting the nickname 'The Drab Four' – Type O's fifth album, *World Coming Down*, was especially bleak. Its lyrical narratives of drug addiction and familial loss were taken directly from Peter Steele's experiences at the end of the 90s.

"Much of my recent time's been taken up by funerals," Peter revealed to *Hammer* at the time. In another interview, he quipped that "everyone else's family is growing – mine's shrinking," responding to the

interviewer's polite congratulations that Kenny had recently welcomed his first child.

Although flippant, Peter's comments hinted at deeper trauma he was trying to overcome. As he turned to drugs for relief, the issues compounded.

"*World Coming Down* might have been our bleakest record, but *Life Is Killing Me* was our bleakest period," says drummer Johnny Kelly, who joined the band after the release of *Bloody Kisses* and remained behind the kit until their eventual split in 2010. "Between girls, drugs and an entourage he'd bring everywhere, Pete was out of his mind more than at any other point."

But in typical Type O Negative fashion, the band responded to adversity with pitch-black humour. As they began writing their sixth album – originally titled 'The Dream Is Dead', eventually released as *Life Is Killing Me* – they decided to reinject a sense of playfulness that had been absent from *World Coming Down*.

"Peter specifically wanted us to have a lot more humour for *Life Is Killing Me*," Johnny recalls.

Not all 'jokes' were appreciated, however. Peter Steele had long courted controversy with his lyrics, the likes of *Jesus Hitler* and *Der Untermensch* seeing Type O dogged with rumours of Nazism



in their early days. In response, the band wrote tongue-in-cheek *Bloody Kisses* track *We Hate Everyone* and explained the accusations away as a misunderstanding about their humour. But *Life Is Killing Me* song *I Like Goils* once again skirted too close to the edge. Anecdotally penned as a jokey response to the increased attention Peter had received from men after posing nude in a 1995 issue of *Playgirl*, the song's lyrics veered into direct homophobia that has come under increased scrutiny in the years since its release.

"Peter liked to poke the bear like that," Johnny says evenly, admitting that while he can't speak for exactly what his bandmate was thinking, he didn't think he was homophobic. "You always had to take Peter's lyrics as something tongue-in-cheek. He was never trying to make a statement, other than to start shit!"

This combative nature came out in other ways too. Peter would argue with his bandmates during rehearsals and recording sessions, long drives out to their space in New York's Rockaway

THE FACTS

RELEASED:
2003

ALBUM:
Life Is Killing Me

PERSONNEL:
Peter Steele
(vocals/bass),
Kenny Hickey
(guitar), Josh
Silver (keyboards),
Johnny Kelly
(drums)





Type O Negative (left to right):
Kenny Hickey, Peter Steele,
Josh Silver, Johnny Kelly

Beach sometimes ending with the band piling back into the van and driving home without playing a note.

"We'd part ways and at, like, one in the morning, the phone would go and there's Pete, calling Johnny like, 'I want to fight you in the street, right now,'" Kenny recalls.

"I told him, 'I'm getting in my truck now – if I'm not there in 45 minutes, start without me,'" Johnny chuckles.

"He had alienated himself from a lot of people, to the point where all he had really was me and Johnny," Kenny admits.

But while the band would fight, the music was still coming together quickly. *World Coming Down* had been especially dirge-filled, every song passing the six-minute mark. While this wasn't unusual – the band had a number of 10-minute-plus songs – the rest of the band were feeling an itch for faster, more energetic compositions.

"We challenged Peter to write a simple song, because he was always

coming to us with these 14-minute opuses!" Kenny recalls. "He came up with *I Don't Wanna Be Me*, this really cool punk rock anthem."

The lead single and opening track proper on *Life Is Killing Me* – after doomy instrumental opener *Thirteen* – *I Don't Wanna Be Me* still crept past five minutes. Nonetheless, the song recaptured the band's hardcore roots, albeit with a gothic, new wave twist as Peter playfully turned his self-loathing

"PETER CALLED ME AND SAID HE WANTED TO FIGHT ME. I TOLD HIM TO START WITHOUT ME"

JOHNNY KELLY

into a bouncy singalong. It set the tone for a record that, by Kenny and Johnny's reckoning, was "all over the place", but to fans captured their genre-blurring buffet of styles.

"There were some songs to me that validated where it sits in the catalogue," Johnny concedes. "*Anesthesia* alone makes it all worth it for me. *Nettie* is really cool, *I Don't Wanna Be Me* is really out there and different from what we were doing, so that was cool. The band needed that variety and humour."

I Don't Wanna Be Me was ultimately the only single to be released from *Life Is Killing Me*. In spite of that, the band were able to shoot a video for the track, actor and comedian Dan Fogler donning a variety of costumes in front of a red theatrical curtain, pretending to be everyone from Marilyn Monroe and Michael Jackson to Britney Spears, Eminem and Peter Steele himself.

"Dan was such a funny guy, we had a lot of fun with that shoot," Johnny recalls fondly.

Released on June 17, 2003, *Life Is Killing Me* proved Type O Negative still had commercial appeal, even if the venues they were playing had shrunk. Breaking into the Top 40 of the US Billboard 200 at No.39, the album

Just what the doctor ordered: Peter Steele performing with Type O at Helsinki's Tuska festival on July 11, 2003



matched the chart position they had achieved on *World Coming Down* four years earlier. But while the goth aesthetic was making a big comeback in the US – propelled by the likes of HIM and Evanescence – Type O weren't able to scale the heights they had enjoyed the previous decade, even as they went on tour with Lacuna Coil and Cradle Of Filth.

"We made some lifelong friends with those people," Johnny says. "There were always laughs – even in the worst situations we could find something funny. Somebody else's misfortune or misery was a good set-up for a punchline."

Type O Negative would only release one more record – 2007's *Dead Again* – as on April 14, 2010, Peter Steele passed away from heart failure. Without their towering frontman, the band decided to call it quits. But for all the doom and strife they experienced over the years, both Johnny and Kenny look back with a sense of fondness and rue for what might have been.

"My gut feeling was that the band never hit their potential," Johnny admits. "So far as Peter's songwriting abilities and whatever, there was always a sense that there was something more in there."

"WE CHALLENGED PETER TO WRITE A SIMPLE SONG"

KENNY HICKEY

"Because he always interfered!" Kenny exclaims. "It's hard to maintain something on that wavelength that the band ran on. To be positive and hit your potential, you'd actually have to have some hope!"

"Peter had optimism... right before he died," Johnny says, deadpan. "He was optimistic and really excited about making a record sober, realising he hadn't applied himself as he should have in later years. Our best record probably would've been the next one."

"He was always a late bloomer, in everything," Kenny agrees. "Our worst enemy was our bleak outlook. It's hard to move forward and have energy if you don't have some kind of positivity. If you look at The Beatles, Lennon was the dark one and McCartney was the light one. We were a band of Lennons. But... I wish I had him back and we still had that going."

I Don't Wanna Be Me remains one of their most enduring anthems,

a testament that even when everything was falling apart, Type O Negative were a singular creative force. In the years since Peter's death, numerous bands have acknowledged Type O's influence, from the likes of Code Orange and Oceans Of Slumber, to Trivium and Pallbearer. Nobody has been more surprised by this than the former members themselves.

"At the time, a song like *I Don't Wanna Be Me* really didn't have the impact or staying power that it has now," Johnny admits. "It's only really a lot later when you start getting bands cover it that it seems to have built up and revitalised it."

"It was a sleeper hit, like one of those songs that takes a few years to really get popular – *Dream On*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, that type of thing," Kenny nods.

"Type O were a sleeper hit all round, then!" Johnny adds with a chuckle. **H**

ROADRUNNER RECORDS' 20TH ANNIVERSARY REISSUE OF *LIFE IS KILLING ME* IS AVAILABLE FOR PREORDER NOW. KENNY AND JOHNNY ARE CURRENTLY WORKING ON THE DEBUT RELEASE FROM THEIR NEW BAND, EYE AM

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LENCE

VILLAGERS OF IOANNINA CITY
EVIL INVADERS • TOTENMESSE
HELLFUCK

Twin Temple

HANABIE
DOOL • ITHACA
CAGE FIGHT

TESSORIZER

MYSTICUM
VLTIMAS • WAYFARER
MÄNBRYNE

Asphyx

BLASPHEMY
BEWITCHED • OWLS WOODS GRAVES
EMBRIONAL

POWERED BY AVOCADO|BOOKING

SUFFOCATION

CRYSTAL LAKE
HUMANITY'S LAST BREATH
SANGUISUGABOGG • TEN56

High on Fire

GAUPA
WIJ • MASSIVE WAGONS
TREPANERINGSRITUALEN • AMPACITY

GRAVEYARD

PIGSX7
THE SHITS • ZAMILSKA
MY DILIGENCE

GRANGE • GOBLIN

HIGH VIS
1000MODS • DVNE
FIVE THE HIEROPHANT • WAVS

WITCHING
PARTY CANNON

SZNUR • MISGUIDED

Skatmöld

LIK • ENDSEEKER
NAKKEKNAEKKER
THE BROKEN HORIZON

BOB VYLAN

SLOPE • MIMI BARKS
DITZ
SCHIZMA

WYATT E. • DÖDSRIT

THE LAST DECADE
MÚR

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THE SHINE STAGE

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YOUR SHOUT

BRUCE IS A JEDI NOW?

...and other questions, presumptions and proclamations you had to offer on Bruce Dickinson returning to the front cover of *Metal Hammer*!

TATOOINE MILLIONAIRE

Bruce is a Jedi now? Well if anyone could do it, it would be Bruce. Just add it to his other accomplishments.

Janet Towater Wickers, Facebook

Well Janet, the man has already proven his skills with a sabre, so we suspect they're fairly transferable to the light variety! We certainly wouldn't mess...

PARTY ON, DARTH

Is that Darth Dickinson?

OdinfjodiVIP, Twitter

The Dark Side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be... unnatural (but badass).

POSTER POST

Great issue, *Metal Hammer*. Can we have that Bruce pic as a poster next issue please?

Trevor Davies, Facebook

Well now, what a magnificent idea, Trevor!

LAUGH IT UP, FUZZBALL

Something something Dark Side. Something something complete.

Jamie Pearson, Facebook

We reckon even Darth Sidious would have his work cut out trying to keep on top of all Bruce's plans, to be honest, Jamie!



Has Bruce headed to the Dark Side? We're here for it

THE BIG 1984

The new Kerry King song sounds like Slayer from *Wish* tbh, a bit meh for me. King plays his solos like it is still 1984

Jan Pavel Morales, Facebook

Nothing wrong with Kerry wanting his guitars to sound like they did when he helped pioneer an entire genre, Jan!

THE FOX GIRLS

Re: Babymetal's all-female festival...

Yes! This would be an amazing line-up. Make it happen

Radio1Dark, Twitter

The band we'd like to see them play with? Hanabie. Just saying...

LARGER THAN LIFE

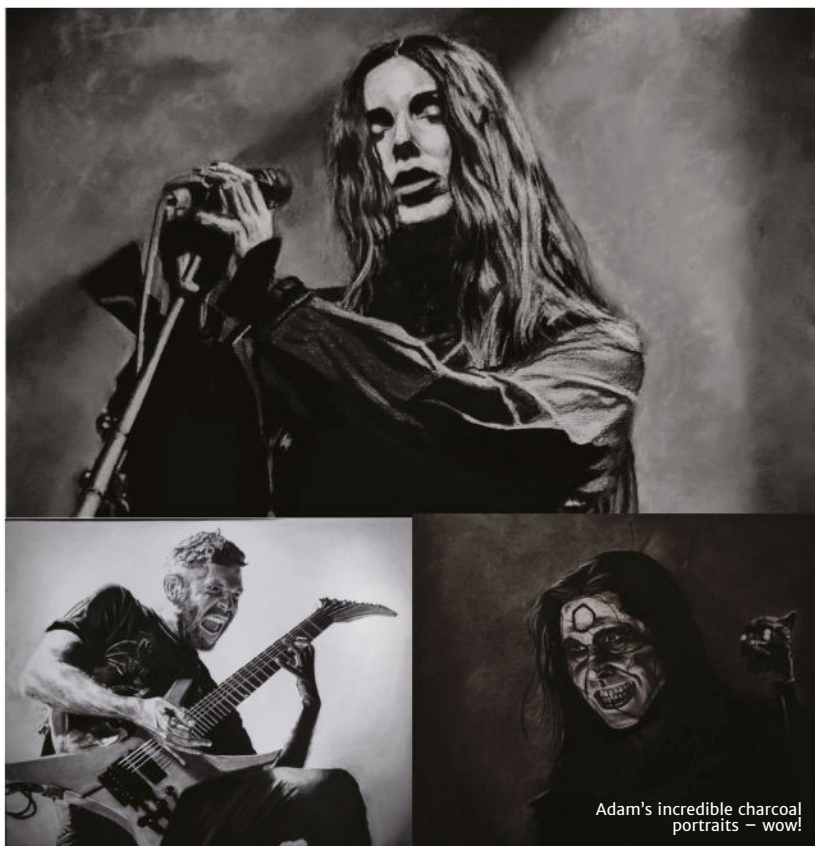
Blind Channel... Is that really complimentary?? You really want to be known as the "backstreet boys" of anything???

Jameshh12817408, Twitter

Ah yes, they call themselves the Backstreet Boys of metal. You could say... they want it that way (sorry).

NEW BANDS, WHO THIS?

Bad Omens, Scene Queen, Hanabie and Lorna Shore on the cover of



Hammer... I must be getting old because I've never heard of any of these bands?

Kyri Martin, Facebook

We've got good news for you, Kyri: this is where we come in and tell you all about these wonderful new bands. Pull up a pew - we've got some good ones!

BRUCEY BONUS

By "playing like children" does Bruce mean writing songs that aren't a day and a half long? I hope so.

Jack Powell, Facebook

Whoa there! That's fighting talk in the Maiden world, Jack, but we reckon you might get your wish if

you're hoping for something a bit less lengthy from Bruce.

DARK ARTS

I'm a visual artist who has been working on a long-running series of photorealistic charcoal portraits of some of my favourite metal and metal-adjacent artists. The artists I choose to draw inspire my art deeply with their music, musicians including Nergal of Behemoth, Devin Townsend, Chelsea Wolfe, Wednesday 13 and more.

Adam Inzalaco, via email

These are absolutely fantastic, Adam! It's always great to see how art can inspire more art in turn.

THE BIG DEBATE

Bands can inspire rabid fanbases, but that has its downsides. Sleep Token erased their social media in January amid rumours of privacy breaches, and Bad Omens' Noah Sebastian has spoken of fans crossing a line. What say you?

WE SAID

"Even if you listen to a band every day, go to every show and follow their every move, they are not your friends."

YOU SAY

"More people need to separate the art from the artist. Who they are as people is irrelevant to the art they make."
Shane Smith, Facebook

"The boundaries between the entertainer and their audience have become dangerously blurred."

Neonoracleofficial, Instagram

"Not our friends, but who gives these bands the fame and money? It's the fans, buying their records, merch, going to concerts to see them, showing true support to them."

Misshorror13, Instagram

"I'm an unashamedly big Sleep Token fan, their music proper speaks to me. Generally their socials are a really friendly place with helpful, knowledgeable people, but there is a truly weird and very vocal minority who seem to be all about sexualising the members."

John Mann, Facebook

"I feel like social media heavily neutered the feeling of a band being a really special and unique experience."

SufferFFS, Twitter

"I have immense respect for any band, artist etc who sets explicit boundaries with their fans."

Zees_Zoomies, Twitter

JOIN THE BIG DEBATE AT FACEBOOK.COM/ GROUPS/METALHAMMERREADERS

HAMMER STEREO

What's been blowing our office speakers



WHILE SHE SLEEPS

Self Hell

"Another spirited record from the steely eyed Sheffielders"

ELEANOR GOODMAN
EDITOR

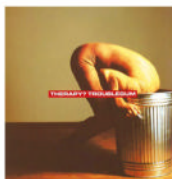


TECHNO ANIMAL

The Brotherhood Of The Bomb

"A bowel-rearranging industrial hip hop motherlode, more attuned than ever to a world on red alert"

JONATHAN SELZER
REVIEWS EDITOR



THERAPY?

Troublelum

"Counting the days until the anniversary gigs in November. I will be losing my mind big time"

VANESSA THORPE
PRODUCTION EDITOR



SKINDRED

Smile

"Giving this another spin in celebration of their deserved MOBO award win"

LOUISE BROCK
ART EDITOR



METH.

Shame

"Noisy, sludgy 'orrible filth. I want to cuddle it and never let go"

RICH HOBSON
STAFF WRITER



JUDAS PRIEST

Invincible Shield

"The Metal Gods' late-career hot streak continues"

DAVE EVERLEY
ASSOCIATE EDITOR



NEW NOISE

BLACKBRIAR

The Dutch band bringing a sense of gothic fantasy back to symphonic metal

WORDS: CATHERINE MORRIS

WHEN IT COMES to subgenres, symphonic metal can sometimes feel like the very antithesis of modernity, and certainly not one that lends itself to making music DIY-style – not without some deep pockets, or a serious compromise on sound. Enter Blackbriar, the plucky young Dutch band who made one of *Hammer's* favourite goth-tinged symphonic albums of 2023 with their second LP, *A Dark Euphony*.

A triumph of fantastical symphonic storytelling and beautiful soundscapes that sounded totally modern, the record was a remarkable feat for a band without abundant resources. The songs of *A Dark Euphony*, while drenched in folkloric and fantasy metaphor that's synonymous with the genre, are mostly grounded in a tangible reality.

Take *An Unwelcome Guest*, for example, one of the more personal songs on the album.

"It's inspired by a painting called *The Nightmare*, which made me think about my own experience with nightmares," explains singer Zora Cock. The painting by Henry Fuseli, in which a demonic creature sits on a sleeping woman's chest, is widely understood to be a depiction of sleep paralysis, a frightening phenomenon that Zora has also experienced for most of her life.

"It's very scary," she admits. "I've had it since I was very young. I used to think that I saw ghosts and stuff as a child, so I was very scared. But now I know a little bit better where it comes from."

Zora met songwriting partner and Blackbriar drummer René Boxem while studying music and sound design. Paired for a project, René

"fell in love" with Zora's voice. The duo began writing in what they describe as a "dark pop" style, with Zora citing Kate Bush and Lana Del Rey ("for the atmosphere") as her early influences back then.

"I'd never even put on a metal album in those days," admits René of his own musical background. "Growing up, I listened to a lot of hard rock, Guns N' Roses, Creedence Clearwater Revival, AC/DC: a completely different type of music. So, the transition into what we're doing now has been a very strange path."

The beginning of that transition? A lightning bolt moment at a Slash concert attended by Zora and René, when the formidable Halestorm took to the stage as support and opened their eyes to the possibilities of a heavier sound.

"I said to René, 'Oh my God, I want to do this'," gushes Zora, remembering how impressed she was by Lizzy Hale.

After experimenting with a hard rock sound that they admit didn't fit them, Blackbriar's path took a detour when Zora, an exceptionally talented and angelic-sounding soprano, tried her hand at harsh vocals on the band's debut single, *Ready To Kill*.

"We were basically wasting her talent when she was grunting," groans René. "At some point, she said, 'This is no longer what I want to do. I'm going to write something and see if it fits this band.' So she wrote what would become *Until Eternity*, which is one of our most streamed songs. That's where it all started."

"But," he adds with a laugh, "we kept *Ready To Kill* on YouTube, just so people know how much we've

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:

A beautifully dark confection of heartfelt gothic fairytales and perfectly executed, sumptuous symphonic metal

FOR FANS OF:

Delain, Stream Of Passion, Epica

LISTEN TO:

Cicada



Blackbriar: the people's metal band

evolved. It was terrible, but we'll keep it on there. We still read comments that say, 'I wish she was still screaming.' And we're like, 'Nope, you have no idea how bad it was!'"

Using platforms like Patreon and Discord has enabled Blackbriar to cultivate a dedicated and engaged fanbase who, for better or worse, can always let them know exactly what they think. It's a smart move for a relatively young band, but does it also invite undue pressure?

"Definitely not," says René. "When we started this band, nobody knew us. Then people started getting into our music and we enjoyed hearing them talk about it. It's always been extremely important for us – like, our number



one priority – to give our fans and listeners the opportunity to be able to communicate with us. If they leave a message, we always reply personally to each and every single one, to thank them for their time, or their compliments. We decided to do Discord just to make it easier for them to get in touch with us; all the bandmembers are in the channel.”

“It’s actually a very tight group of friends now,” adds Zora proudly. “That’s really nice to see as well.”

With more than 2,000 members across their Discord and Patreon, the band makes sure they give something back as frequently as possible, even casting subscribers as extras in their music videos.

“The people you see in the *My Soul’s Demise* video? All Patrons,” says Zora. “That was an unforgettable day.”

“I USED TO THINK I COULD SEE GHOSTS”

ZORA COCK

Blackbriar: the people’s metal band. In 2024, things are certainly looking up for the sextet – last year, they completed a 10-date co-headline tour with the excellent Ad Infinitum, and they’re set to go to the US with Finnish power metallers Battle Beast this

spring. They have also toured with symphonic metal giants Epica and collaborated with ex-Delain singer Charlotte Wessels on a spellbinding cover of Ghost’s viral megahit, *Mary On A Cross*. But among all the excitement of new possibilities, they’re still looking to each other for their inspiration.

Not just a pretty voice or merely a ‘muse’, frontwoman Zora is the driving force of Blackbriar’s music, with René admitting that when it comes to songwriting: “I just write to what Zora produces for me. My biggest inspiration is what she does.” **H**

A DARK EUPHONY IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST

NEW NOISE

LAKE MALICE

The Brightonians making snarling, glitchy metalcore inspired by alternative pop

WORDS: WILL MARSHALL



LAKE MALICE ARE standing in the stairwell of Camden's Black Heart, about to play their first ever, sold-out, UK headline show. And, despite supporting the likes of Skindred, Vended and Enter Shikari in the past, they're nervous.

"It feels weird to play our own show," vocalist Alice Guala admits. "These people are here for us? That's fucking nuts!"

Alice and kindred spirit/guitarist Blake Cornwall formed Lake Malice in 2021, the pair bonding online over a love of metalcore as well as alternative pop artists such as Ashnikko and Charli XCX. Those influences show up in their songs, which mix glitchy electronics, virulent screams and towering melodies, their lyrics drawing on a combination of Alice's life experiences and the art that inspires her – be it the scathing *Bloodbath* addressing toxic relationships, or *Mitsuko*, whose revenge fantasy video takes visual cues from *Stranger Things*.

"There's a metal influence that'll always be there because it's our background," Blake explains. "But we find ourselves listening less to traditional metal bands and more to

bands that just sound heavy. There's more freedom to experiment."

And experiment they do. Fusing elements of hyperpop, trap and metalcore, Lake Malice are an invigorating prospect, from the pulsating *Magic Square* to mosh

anthem *Stop The Party*.

"The gap between pop and metal is getting smaller," Alice says excitedly, considering the increasing profile of up-and-coming metal artists like Spiritbox, who recently collaborated with hip hop star Megan Thee Stallion. "It feels like it used to be when Jay-Z worked with Linkin Park."

From creating sci-fi and horror-styled music videos to putting on high-energy live shows, the pair's aim is to make sure people are electrified by everything they do.

"When a song makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, it's so fucking powerful," Blake says. "I want that." **H**

POST-GENESIS IS OUT NOW VIA SO RECORDINGS. LAKE MALICE'S UK TOUR STARTS IN BRIGHTON ON MARCH 6 AND THE BAND PLAY BURN IT DOWN AND TAKEDOWN FESTIVALS THIS SUMMER

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:

A futuristic fusion of hyperpop, trap and metalcore

FOR FANS OF:

Spiritbox, Enter Shikari, Ashnikko

LISTEN TO:

Mitsuko

LAANG 冷

The Taiwanese black metal duo screaming for catharsis from the depths of trauma

WORDS: MATT MILLS

LAANG DESCRIBE THEMSELVES as "black metal from Taiwan based on the trauma of a survivor". Taiwanese singer and guitarist Haitao Yang started the project in 2018, 18 months after he was declared medically dead; he was shot in the head during an attempted carjacking.

"I was in the US at the time," Haitao, now based in Tennessee, tells *Hammer*. "I was returning to my car in a car park, and there were two people standing next to it I didn't know. I just remember one of them walking towards me and then I was on the ground. I couldn't feel anything. It just felt very cold, very numb."

Haitao had a history of making metal before Laang. He lived in Taiwan until he was seven, when his family moved to Norway, and he ended up in some black and power metal projects. However, Laang's more personal, cathartic black metal taps into Haitao's Taiwanese identity via instruments such as the erhu (a two-stringed bowed instrument), while the synths and vocals carry the urgency of melodeath. It's a combination that, together with the incredibly evocative backstory, is seeing the band resonate across the extreme metal underground.

"I've had people with similar experiences approach me on tour or on social media, saying they really appreciate having something that allows them to not suffer in silence," Haitao says. "Seeing that this is helpful for other people is really rewarding, and I think that's probably the most that I could hope for." **H**

RILUO IS OUT NOW VIA TALHEIM

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:

Evocative black metal with a rampaging, melodeath bent

FOR FANS OF:

Harakiri For The Sky, Foretoken, Pure Wrath

LISTEN TO:

Liuxue De Taiyang
流血的太陽

GUILT TRIP

Manchester hardcore mob trade
A New Hope for the New Testament

WORDS: TIM BOLITHO-JONES • PICTURES: ALEX WILKINSON

IN SHORT SOUNDS LIKE:

Furious Northern hardcore with a hint of melancholy

FOR FANS OF:
Comeback Kid,
Darkest Hour,
Your Demise

LISTEN TO:
*Tearing Your
Life Away*

IT'S AMAZING HOW much a name change can impact a band.

"When we started taking things seriously, we thought, 'Let's get a decent name'" explains Jak Maden, guitarist with fast-rising hardcore quartet Guilt Trip. "We were originally called Mos Eisley! I don't think it would have done us any favours... Although, we could have toured with Bossk."

Since then, the Manchester crew have gone all-in, taking their music from a fun hobby to a serious concern, and become one of the UK's most exciting metallic hardcore bands. They've graced the stages of numerous festivals, supported Malevolence on a sold-out UK tour, and even released new album *Severance* on Malevolence's record label. Jak describes it as "metal enough for metalheads and hardcore



enough for hardcore heads" – and he's bang on.

Guilt Trip might lean towards 'core, but there are plenty of beefy riffs and hooks that will appeal to a wider audience. From the artwork to the lyrics, *Severance* is also awash with biblical references, and questions of faith sit alongside traditional hardcore themes of surviving in the face of adversity. But make no mistake, *Severance* is not a clergy-approved

sermon with guitars in the background – it's a pit-igniting monster.

Is Jak bothered about being seen as a Christian band? "Our current hoodie depicts Saint Michael defeating the Devil," he explains. "I don't think anyone who sees it will think, 'Oh that's a Christian hoodie.' It's just hard!" **H**

SEVERANCE IS OUT NOW VIA MLVLT. GUILT TRIP PLAY DOWNLOAD FESTIVAL IN JUNE



KNIFE BRIDE

Brighton newcomers create something beautiful with "nu gothika"

WORDS: ALI SHUTLER • PICTURES: SAM ROCKMAN

THE MISSION STATEMENT for Brighton's Knife Bride was a simple one: "We just wanted to do something heavy," explains vocalist Mollie Buckley, with the five-piece drawn to metal's drama. "It's always made me feel things that other music couldn't."

They described their first few singles as "slut metal" but the release of debut EP *Don't Dream Too Much* in August saw them embrace "nu gothika".

"It was less about a shock factor, more about creating something beautiful that people could escape within," says Mollie.

The music is wonderfully outrageous. Inspired by everything from Bring Me to Kate Bush, there's a fearlessness to Knife Bride's cinematic sound, and their lyrics tackle everything from love and revenge to how the streets aren't safe for women. Plus, every Knife Bride track delivers a hefty dose of empowerment.

"This band is about championing strong emotions," Mollie explains. "It's important to talk about serious experiences, but it's just as important to create a safe space to dance." **H**

DON'T DREAM TOO MUCH IS OUT NOW. KNIFE BRIDE SUPPORT VUKOVI IN LONDON ON MARCH 15, AND PLAY DOWNLOAD FESTIVAL IN JUNE AND 2000 TREES IN JULY

IN SHORT SOUNDS LIKE:

A thunderous, cathartic party

FOR FANS OF:
Spiritbox,
Wargasm,
Evanescence

LISTEN TO:
Sacrifice/Surrender



HOARD ALMIGHTY

Box sets, underground oddities and all the essential merch you need this month



MOTÖRHEAD THE LOST TAPES: THE COLLECTION VOLUMES 1-5

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EVEN IN DEATH, Motörhead are the gift that keep on giving. Retrieved from Lemmy's vast store of live tape recordings, and eventually identified by notes he'd left behind, the five European concerts collected here, spanning 13 years, have already been released digitally – and four of them on vinyl – but never before as a box set. True purists might have wanted them in their original cassette form, but most of us want to actually play the damn things, and the semi-matt, gatefold sleeves, with a unified reel-to-reel case design (y'know, for the ultra-purists), housing these eight CDs still feels talismanic. From the Madrid show in '95, full of raw power like they're played via a rusty nail used as a stylus, to shows from Norwich, Malmö, Heilbronn and finally Download Festival in 2008 (now also released on vinyl and in a bonus bundle), this is Motörhead as they were meant to be heard: dirty, distorted and driven straight into thousands of headbanging skulls.
tinyurl.com/motor-tapes



SWALLOW THE SUN SINGLES BOX SET

£121.90

STS will swallow a princely sum for their gorgeous, limited-to-1,000 box set. These 12" singles (on coloured and black wax) span the death-doomers' Spinefarm albums, with a booklet and certificate for the papercut-hardy.
tinyurl.com/sts-boxset



BAPHOMET PIN BADGE

£12

In 2024, hailing the horned one's never been easier. No, you don't *need* to sacrifice a child or do some hand-holding séance involving your weird neighbour's bodily fluids. Just clip this hunk to your lapel.

tinyurl.com/baphomet-pin



LACUNA COIL CASSETTE BOX SET

£121.90

This 11-tape box set spans the gothic metal maestros' 25-year career, comprising nine albums and two EPs. Stylish as ever, it also comes in the sort of posh box your oddest aunt might use to store haunted heirlooms.
tinyurl.com/lacuna-tapes



MEGADETH FUNKO POP! VINYL

£30.99

Pop! Sells... But Who's Buying? You, presumably. Snag a lil' Vic Rattlehead in all his bulbous-skulled, beplasticked glory, with a tidy presentation box to boot. Just don't mention the Metallica ones to Dave. Funky subject. tinyurl.com/peace-pop



BAD OMENS HOODIE

£60.99

Bad Omens are metal's buzziest new band, so why not bedeck oneself with gear? While this hoodie is decidedly understated, its sleeve-printed logo means you can spread the word even if you're doing the YMCA. tinyurl.com/omens-hoodie

HOARD ALMIGHTY



DRAGONFORCE BUNDLE

£34.15

Sleep Token coin too steep? Dragonforce got you covered. Their new record comes with a gaming coin, gym bag, two CDs, poster flag and a sweatband for all that wan- *Guitar Hero* you'll be doing. tinyurl.com/warp-bundle



CLIFF BURTON FIGURE

£24

Even standing at 3.75", it's *those* bell-bottoms, *that* Misfits t-shirt, *the* 'tache – nobody can deny the late Metallica bassist's drip. If that's not swayed you, proceeds go towards the Cliff Burton Music Scholarship Fund. tinyurl.com/cliff-figure



PARADISE LOST PHONE CASE

£23

The blurry image on the back may not say much for your gig-shooting prowess, but if you can even bring yourself to hold your phone aloft, do it in true miserable style from behind this dour plastic sheath. tinyurl.com/lost-case



LIFE IS KILLING ME VINYL REISSUE

£57.49

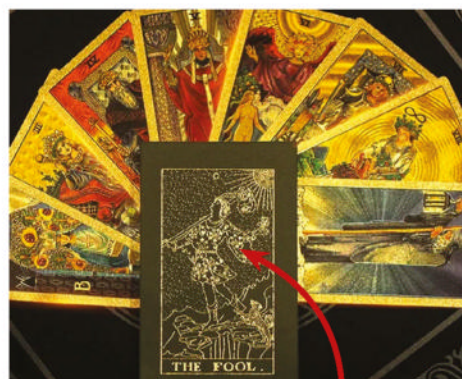
Not every song on Type O's penultimate album has aged well, but their combination of unquenchable ire, libido and world weariness remains in full force on this three-disc vinyl reissue, with classic green/black splatter effect. tinyurl.com/life-revisited



TAROT AROMAS

£22/£53

Coven HQ starting to pong? That'd be the black cat – damn thing can't keep its bladder shut. Diffuse these tarot-inspired scents about the place to conjure a more appropriate atmosphere for your witchy antics. tinyurl.com/tarot-aromas



GOLD FOIL TAROT

£11.99

Although it suggests a golden age to come, use this opulent-looking, and elegantly boxed, gold foil tarot set to foretell the dismal fate of friends and family – or your incontinent black cat. tinyurl.com/foiled-again



HIGHER POWER T-SHIRT

£36

Designer Nicola Mary Wyatt prides herself on being able to add a touch of dark, gothic flair to wardrobe staples. Case in point? This striking cotton ringer tee, which projects both graveyard vibes and powerful female energy. tinyurl.com/higher-power

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JUDAS PRIEST

Kitt



ROB HALFORD ARE METAL

... according to Rob Halford. And he'd know, because he's the Metal God. He's also a national treasure, a gay icon, and Dolly Parton's BFF (well, kinda)

WORDS: JOE DALY • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

Tuyo, the theme song from *Narcos*, wafts lazily in the background of the dimly lit studio, as Rob Halford, Judas Priest's iconic frontman, glares through the dark lenses of his aviator sunglasses, his head crowned by a shiny leather cop hat. The photographer snaps away. Dressed to the nines in his black biker coat, hands adorned with fingerless, studded gloves, Rob looks like he's ready to rain hellfire and brimstone upon a stadium full of surging, wild-eyed headbangers. Then things get weird.

"Are you ready for a kitty cat?" inquires Travis Shinn, the photographer.

"I'm always ready for a kitty cat," Rob replies, with palpable excitement.

This is no saucy volley of double entendres, but an exchange that introduces a heart-melting spectacle. A tiny, orange tabby kitten is handed to Rob, and his stoic metal façade crumbles, revealing a man bursting with unadulterated joy.

It's obvious to every metalhead with an internet connection that Rob loves kittens. On Instagram (727,000 followers and counting), he posts an inordinate amount of feline memes, poses in kitty t-shirts, and often tags LA nonprofit Kitten Rescue. However, today's photoshoot is at a recording studio in Rob's hometown of Phoenix, Arizona, so we've called in local organisation the Arizona Animal Welfare League (see Hell Bent Fur Leather box, page 40) to brighten Rob's day.

Kiwi, the tabby, gazes deeply into the Metal God's face before suddenly turning fugitive. After a swift rescue, he's replaced with Hazel, a shy black kitten with saucer-sized eyes. She purrs her way into Rob's embrace, finding solace in his snowy white beard. The room is now a symphony of coos and clicks, as Travis immortalises the love fest. Rob, lost in the moment, lavishes Hazel with affection, in a scene that's oddly tender and starkly different from the metal fury that he's known to command.

"I love all creatures," Rob says wistfully, after the last kitten has been whisked away. "Animals were here before we were, weren't they? Ha ha! So there's the respect right there. They're such an important part of your life, whether you're an owner of a dog, cat, lizard, snake... You develop a bond to this living, breathing creature. They're companions, they have empathy. Particularly when there's some kind of challenge going on in their person's life, like a bereavement, they snuggle up to you. It's a very profound moment."

We retreat to a snug back lounge in the studio – a hallowed ground where Rob's etched countless tracks into the annals of metal history. His longtime partner, Thomas, delivers a steaming cup of coffee to him. We slump into the black leather couches, ready to get a sense of Rob Halford in 2024.

In the public eye, he's a screeching, leather-clad firebrand, a tireless preacher in the church of heavy metal, ever ready to spread the gospel to the horn-throwing faithful across the globe. He's also a beacon of inclusivity and a much-loved member of the LGBTQIA+ community, coming out on MTV in 1998. But seated across from us today, Rob is mellow. His 72 years have resulted in wisdom born from raw life experience, and a sobriety streak running 38 years strong.

He speaks with an ease that's disarming, flipping questions back at us like a seasoned card shark. Decades in the States haven't scrubbed away that thick Black Country accent, as if it's a badge of honour he refuses to shed.

"Who I am as a person has never really dissipated," he says. Smiling, he continues, "We call ourselves 'Yam Yams.' To be a 'Yam Yam' is to come from my part of the West Midlands, or the Black Country, as we call it. And you don't put yourself on a pedestal. You don't elevate yourself because

we're all people, we all do different kinds of jobs. I happen to be a singer in a heavy metal band. The fact that it is who it is and what we've achieved is irrelevant."

In 1973, Rob joined forces with the rampaging British metal beast known as Judas Priest, adding his otherworldly vocals to a classic line-up that included guitarists Glenn Tipton and K.K. Downing, alongside bassist Ian Hill.

Members have come and gone throughout the ensuing half century, including Rob himself, who took leave of the band from 1992–2003 to pursue various solo projects. K.K. Downing left in 2011 and, for several years now, the line-up has featured Rob, Glenn and Ian alongside drummer Scott Travis (since 1989) and guitarist Richie Faulkner (since 2011). They're now poised to release *Invincible Shield* – incredibly, it'll be the 19th album for the band, and the 17th for Rob.

These days, Rob's a long way from his fellow Yam Yams. He first set foot in Arizona in 1988, rolling through town after a show in Las Vegas. Phoenix, a bizarre cocktail of painted desert mirage and concrete reality, whispered seductively to him, its sun-blasted landscapes cutting a stark contrast to the industrial West Midlands.

"I've always said that everybody has another favourite place, don't they?" he says. "Like if it's a vacation place, you keep going back to that one special vacation place because it means so much to you. That's what happened to me with Phoenix."

Over the years, myriad bands have asked Rob to share his insights for surviving the steel-jawed carnivore that is the music industry, including a young System Of A Down passing through Phoenix in the 90s, while opening for Slayer.

"I told them that you have to remember to love each other, talk to each other and give each other hugs," he says. "Every band is this great big emotional fireball. It's a very difficult process to keep it all working well. On the musical level, things might be working fine, but it's the other stuff you really need to pay attention to as well. That's why I always say, in my bits of Gandalf metal wisdom, talk to each other. Whatever's on your mind, just say what it is. The development of your relationship with people in the band is probably more important than your relationship with the music."

In 1986, after years of relentlessly punishing his body and his psyche with booze and drugs, Rob put himself before the music and raised the white flag with his bandmates. He dove headlong into recovery, and has remained clean and sober ever since. In 2020, he underwent treatments to remove cancerous growths from his prostate, receiving the all-clear from doctors a year later.

"Before," he says, "when I was faced with life issues, particularly when I was in the closet, I'd just get blitzed out of my mind because a) it would make me feel better and b) it would kind of dampen down the pain I was going through. So to be at this place now where you deal head-on with, 'Oh, you've got cancer' – back in the day, it would have been 'Give me a couple of lines,' or 'Let me do a gram.'"

Today, Rob exudes a deep sense of ease. Every morning, he does a prayer ritual, and every night he practises gratitude.

"Now I'm always at this kind of peaceful place, to deal with anything that life throws at me," he adds. "It's a beautiful thing, isn't it? It is a gift."

It's a gift that served him well in 1998 when, during his time away from Judas Priest, he stepped into the glaring lights of MTV and came out to the world.

"I think that most people know that I've been a gay man all of my life, and it's only been in recent times that it's an issue I feel comfortable to address," he said on camera. "This is the moment to discuss it."

"When I made that announcement at the MTV studio, I didn't really realise how big of a deal that was going to be,"

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**“CREATURES
ARE COMPANIONS.
THEY HAVE
EMPATHY”**



he says today. “This was before the internet, so the way the message was communicated was at a snail’s pace. Which isn’t a bad thing, because when Billie Eilish finally made the pronunciation of who she is [she unintentionally came out as bisexual in 2023], the world was on fire for 48 hours and then the world moved on. I think I understood within a matter of days how I’d now put myself into a place of, ‘What’s going to happen next?’”

In the landscape of the 90s music industry, coming out as LGBTQIA+ was akin to stepping into a hurricane. An artist risked lost record deals, vanishing radio play and a mainstream audience recoiling in their archaic prejudices. For Rob to go public was pure courage on display, and he felt a flood of relief.

“There’s no doubt that I became a better person because I could just let go of a lot of the walls that I had to create around me for my own protection,” he continues. “Mostly for the band’s protection. If I’d have gone back to Priest as I did, and I still hadn’t come out of the closet, would I have made that announcement? Life has these beautiful things that happen to you that are sometimes out of your reach. So that coming out episode was probably the best opportunity that I had to suddenly be who I am.”

Today, Rob is not only a well-loved member of the metal community, but of the mainstream. In 2022, Judas Priest were finally inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, alongside country music legend – and gay icon – Dolly Parton. The ceremony unleashed a bizarre yet brilliant spectacle, with the Metal God joining forces with Dolly or a rendition of her massive hit *Jolene*, resplendent in a long, black, glinting jacket with vertical, stud-embellished white strips.

“Somehow, instinctively, I knew we were going to meet,” Rob explains with a radiant intensity. “I always tell the story of my mother’s grandmother, who was a clairvoyant, and I still think I’ve got a little of that in me, because something went, ‘You’re going to meet Dolly Parton.’ Two or three days later, these emails come into the office, and Dolly’s reached out, asking, ‘Would you sing some lines on *Jolene*?’ You sit at home and go, ‘Oh my god, this is truly going to happen!’ Being a gay guy, ‘I’ve got nothing to wear!’ I know that she likes to sparkle and I like to sparkle, so what I wore on that night was apropos.”

“THERE’S THIS FULL-ON DETERMINATION TO SEE IF WE’VE STILL GOT IT”

When they first met at the rehearsal, the two legends clicked immediately.

“She goes, ‘I love your beard!’” he exclaims, “and she starts to clean my beard! It was so surreal! I’m meeting this living legend and she’s tickling my beard and going, ‘So you’re going to sing some *Jolene* with me?’ I was just floating.”

In 2023, the two duetted on the song *Bygones*, for Dolly’s crossover album, *Rockstar*. Rob opens his arms and gestures broadly across the room, explaining that he recorded his vocals in this very studio while she was in Nashville with her producer, Kent Wells.

“We’re on the phone to each other and she’s going [puts on a credible Southern US accent], ‘Send me the files! Send me the files!’ So I sent her the files and she calls back and goes, ‘I love these! This is gonna be great!’ This is Dolly Parton on speakerphone! Ha ha! She’s just this beautiful beacon of life. You can tell by the way I’m speaking that this is important



Judas Priest: 50 years in and truly invincible

to me as a musician, to have had this literally once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with someone so great.”

It wasn’t the only once-in-a-lifetime opportunity Rob had last year. On October 7, he walked onstage at California’s Power Trip – one of the biggest metal festivals in history. With upwards of 200,000 attendees over three days, it featured Metallica, Iron Maiden, Guns N’ Roses, AC/DC, Tool and there, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of Ozzy Osbourne’s unfortunate cancellation due to health reasons, Judas Priest.

Reviewers, in a blissed-out, post-festival haze, anointed Judas Priest as the weekend’s zenith, eclipsing even the mighty AC/DC. It was a thrilling testament to the electrifying allure of OG British metal in a world overrun by a mainstream gone stagnant.

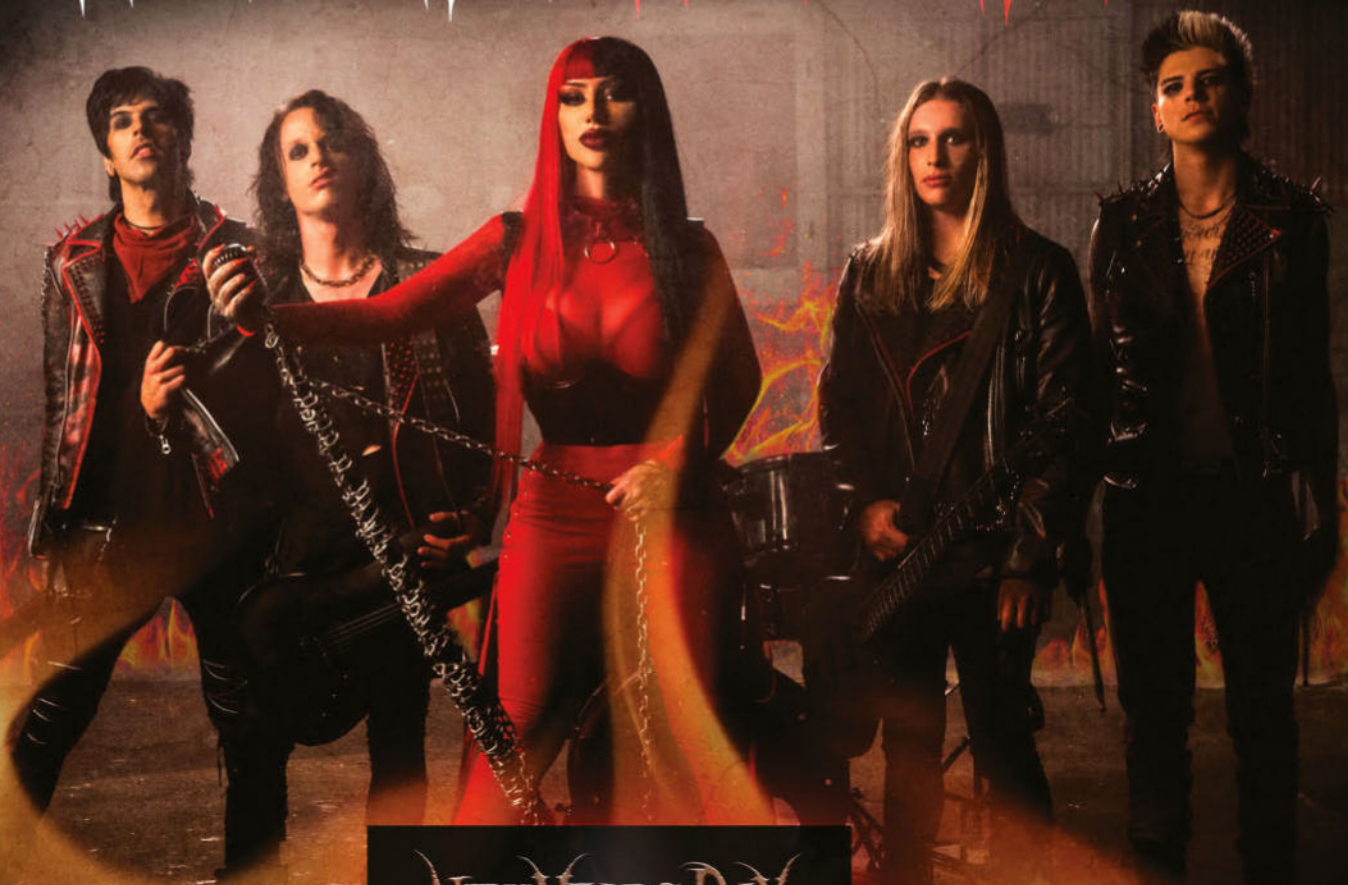
“It felt right,” Rob says. “It felt like we needed to be there. I saw all my friends who were going to be playing, including Ozzy, and I thought, ‘Man, this is so great. What a great cross section of rock and metal.’ But Power Trip was more about showing this league of musicians together in a very unique presentation. The sadness that Ozzy wasn’t able to make it and the thrill to get the call – that Ozzy would love to see if you guys would step in – that kind of completed the picture in a lot of ways, minus Ozzy.”

In 2018, Glenn Tipton stepped away from touring duties after disclosing a diagnosis of later-stage Parkinson’s disease. He’s remained active in the studio and has appeared onstage with the band a number of times since. In the dusty California desert, he joined them once again to the roaring delight of the crowd.

Beaming with pride, Rob says, “It was just beautiful when he came out and the audience went, ‘Glenn!’ He’s such a hero and he received so much love and respect, as he deserves, because he’s one of the greatest ever metal guitar players that’s lived. There is no other guitar player like Glenn Tipton.

“That was a special moment for Glenn. It was almost like a complete cycle because – I won’t say this with my hand ▶

NEW YEARS DAY NEW YEARS DAY



'HALF BLACK HEART'

CALIFORNIA'S DARK METAL TITLE-HOLDERS NEW YEARS DAY MAKE A TRIUMPHANT RETURN WITH THEIR FOLLOW-UP TO 2019'S 'UNBREAKABLE'. MIXED BY MITCH MARLOW (PAPA ROACH, IN THIS MOMENT, ALL THAT REMAINS)

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on my heart – but there’s a possibility that was the last time that you saw Glenn play live. It’s getting increasingly difficult for him. So for him to find the strength to actually come out and play is a beautiful thing. Having said that, we’re about to start the big *Invincible Shield* tour in the UK and, if I know Glenn, he’ll get in his car and drive to Glasgow, do the show and then drive home. Ha ha!”

With Rob, Glenn and Ian in their 70s, it’d be both easy and misleading to view *Invincible Shield* as a bookend to Judas Priest’s storied career. For Rob, it’s a continuation of what they’ve always delivered.

“It’s another strong, solid representation of what this band can do,” he says. “We’re not holding back. There’s still this full-on determination to see if we’ve still got it.”

With *Invincible Shield*, they have distilled the essence of their past and blended it with the force of modern production. In the ‘Don’t Repair Things That Work Just Fine’ category, the guys relied on the songwriting model that’s served them faithfully for decades.

“When Glenn and Richie and myself get in a room, like Priest have always done, as a three-piece – two guitar

“THAT COMING OUT EPISODE? I COULD SUDDENLY BE WHO I AM”

players and a singer – that’s the metal magic,” Rob explains. “All of that energy, all of that youthful exuberance was still there in those initial writing sessions.”

Rob then answers the question about Glenn that’s been endlessly asked on social media.

“He’s still an important contributor to everything this band does,” Rob says, “including his work all over *Invincible Shield*. That’s Glenn playing the guitar. So whether it’s just a chord, whether it’s riffs, or whether it’s a little bit of lead, Glenn is on *Invincible Shield*. That needs to be said. His value and his input have not diminished; he’s just as important a part of Priest as he ever was.”

As Rob listened to the grooves coming together, the lyrics and themes began revealing themselves to him – particularly the defiant title track.

“I realised that all of these songs are part of an invincible shield,” he explains. “Priest is an invincible shield. Metal is an invincible shield. Our fans create an invincible shield. I just love the visualisation. Initially, a shield defends you, but it also lets you push forward. It’s a great object, a shield. ▶

His little face!!!!
(And the kitten’s...)



HELL BENT FUR LEATHER Meet the rescue kitties who played with Rob

For our shoot with Rob, non-profit organisation Arizona Animal Welfare League brought along five cute kittens – Kiwi, Hazel, Orlando Jr., Loki and Kosha, pictured here in order – who took turns having cuddles. Founded in 1971, the AAWL precedes Judas Priest’s debut album, *Rocka Rolla*, by three years. Since joining the tireless battle to alleviate animal homelessness in the Phoenix area, the AAWL has rescued 100,000 cats and dogs from the streets, providing them with food and medical care and placing them in forever homes. Today, they average around 300–400 dogs and cats in their care on any given day, and adopt out around 4,000 pets annually. For more information, visit aawl.org



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**“DOLLY PARTON
WAS TICKLING
MY BEARD!”**

Then you put the word 'invincible' next to it and man, that's a big statement right there. I presented the whole idea to the guys and they were like, 'Yeah, thumbs up – let's do this!'"

Longtime producer Andy Sneap has taken on an even greater role. In addition to stepping in for Glenn as the band's second guitarist, he wields a galaxy of experience gleaned from producing and jamming with a legion of metal bands.

"Andy's a blessing," says Rob. "Firstly, the day that Glenn said he felt that he was going to step back and let Andy stand in his place onstage, that was a very profound moment. Andy was able to do Glenn's parts really well. He was in a band called Hell and he was in a band called Sabbat."

Rob grins.

"That's the black dog metal – the evil stuff, as I call it."

Invincible Shield opens with an eyebrow-searing firestorm of *Panic Attack*, *The Serpent And The King* and the title track.

"We always think about those first three tracks," explains Rob. "I think that every band understands that your fans have been eagerly awaiting your new music and you've really got to be strong and forceful in what you're displaying. By the end of your third song, the commitment should be there from your fans. They've got to be going, 'You guys have got it. I'm all-in!'"

At this moment, Travis, our photographer, walks into the room to bid farewell. He compliments Rob on the black leather codpiece he wore during the shoot, before turning to leave.

"Travis! Come here... Travis!" shouts Rob. As he re-enters the room, Rob flings the codpiece to him.

"Are you serious?" asks a gobsmacked Travis.

"Yes. It's a new one, actually," Rob says.

"You just made my day," says our intrepid photographer.

"You can send me a Christmas card with you wearing that," laughs Rob. "Have you ever, in your life, with all the bands you've worked with, had a gift like that?"

Howls of laughter fill the room.

Along with a new album and touring, 2024 ushers in a momentous occasion: the anniversary of Priest's debut album. For Rob, it's something of a full-circle moment.

"We are going to be celebrating 50 years of *Rocka Rolla*, so I've just sat down and been listening to it again. We've got some exciting things in the pipeline for that record," he smiles. "The timing on *One For The Road*, and the phrasing on that, it's so peculiar, so different, it's so never-been-done-before... those little elements have been with Priest from *Rocka Rolla* to *Invincible Shield*."

At 72 years old, Rob remains energised, still delivering metal bangers with convincing passion while taking time to donate codpieces to wayward photographers, cuddle cats, run a wildly entertaining Instagram account and be a generally awesome human being. Though seasoned by the years behind him, Rob Halford continues to look squarely into the future, embracing change and living in a state of gratitude.

"What I like today about the music business is that people used to have to fit into boxes. It was almost like there was an expiration date, you know? Ageism would play its role and the way you looked played a role. All that's done now. There's just total respect there for everything that you do, how you look, what you say, whether you're straight, gay, whatever. That's irrelevant, because we're all people and we're all being creative in the music world."

He smiles.

"We're still a bunch of kids, really! Ha ha! We get in the van and flip each other off! It's stupid but it's beautiful." 

INVINCIBLE SHIELD WILL BE RELEASED ON MARCH 8 VIA SONY. JUDAS PRIEST WILL TOUR THE UK FROM MARCH 11

"THERE'S FIRE AND DOOM!"

Rob Halford's track-by-track guide to *Invincible Shield*

PANIC ATTACK

The album opener easily delivers on Rob's promise that the first three tracks are a calculated throat-grab – a full-throttle bid to pound your soul into absolute submission. Frenzied tempos and blazing, razorwire riffs dominate the hyper-addictive single throughout. Of its meaning, Rob says, "*Panic Attack* is looking at the Internet and the way that we tend to look at the more ominous, darker sides of what it can be utilised for."



of metal, machines and battle, this one finds the frontman unguarded and introspective. "This is a very reflective track," he says. "It's about bearing your own pain and responsibility and all that that entails."

AS GOD IS MY WITNESS

Befitting its empowering messages, this mixes scything riffs and intense speeds in an unambiguous show of force. It's no less than a seismic reminder that before the likes of Slayer, there was Judas Priest. According to Rob: "This one's about standing up for yourself, believing in what you're capable of doing, and succeeding."

TRIAL BY FIRE

Another mid-paced number with surging riffs and a chorus destined to echo throughout the stadiums of the world on their latest tour. The words carry a deep, personal meaning for Rob, while still being intended as a bright beacon of optimism and hope for the faithful. "In today's world," says Rob, "the public can be judge, jury and executioner, so you have to be in a place where you respect your own value and worth and you'll fight for it every step of the way. Hence, life can sometimes be a trial by fire."

ESCAPE FROM REALITY

Dive headfirst into the soul of *Turbo*—era Priest with this behemoth of a mid-tempo anthem. It's a cerebral pilgrimage, chugging through the brain's crevices – a spiritual hideaway bathed in the glow of glistening melodic solos and atmospheric thunder. "This is about getting lost in metal," says Rob. "Just floating away and going to that place where only metal can take you."

SONS OF THUNDER

Roaring and impressive, the taut, distorted riffs and propulsive grooves here are masterfully calibrated for maximum headbanging. Catchy as hell, with glistening leads and a singalong chorus. "This is a reimagining of *Hell Bent For Leather*," says Rob, "rolling on thunder and being unstoppable and having camaraderie. In my mind I see millions of metal maniacs on bikes roaring across the desert."

GIANTS IN THE SKY

Ending with a towering salvo of classic metal, *Invincible Shield*'s closer is a captivating ode to Dio, Lemmy and the enduring power of radio. Rob says: "Radio has this really special way of communicating to us, no matter where we might be – whether you're in the car, whether you're at home, whether you're at work on a break, whether you're at school on a break, whatever. You listen to the radio and you're listening to these giants in the sky. The giants are Ronnie and Lemmy, as I visualise them. Right now, they're floating around in the Heavens."

THE SERPENT AND THE KING

Lest anyone wonder if the mighty Priest might be slowing down, this cut soars at a velocity reached by few tracks in their storied catalogue. With Rob flexing his legendary vocal range and waves of fist-pumping solos, this will be an instant fan favourite. Says Rob: "The Serpent is the Devil and the King is God and they're locked in battle. You see all this light and hope and glory, and you see all of this fire and doom and death and destruction. I thought, 'God, that's so metal!'"

INVINCIBLE SHIELD

Building upon the unrelenting force of its predecessor, the title track opens with a siege of scorching riffs and a marauding thrust, leading to a triumphant chorus and a jaw-dropping solo that recalls the very best of *Defenders Of The Faith*—era Priest. "It's the statement about this band being an invincible shield in metal, and what we feel we are as a band," explains Rob. "It's also a thank-you to our fans, because every one of our fans is holding an invincible shield."

DEVIL IN DISGUISE

Guitarists Richie Faulkner and Glenn Tipton don't simply rekindle that old Priest magic here, they tap into breathtaking waves of fretted interplay, trading riffs and leads with chest-beating swagger. "When someone is presenting themselves in one way but you can see another side of their personality that they're trying to hide," says Rob, "they are a devil in disguise."

GATES OF HELL

A simmering beast, this delivers all of the signature elements that define Judas Priest: screaming guitars, a hard-driving rhythm with an utterly pummelling bassline, and defiant, horn-throwing lyrics about metal maniacs crashing through the gates of Hell. Rob lights up at the song's very mention, exclaiming, "This track is great! I just love the idea of Judas Priest roaring through the gates of Hell on Harley-Davidsons."

CROWN OF HORNS

This brooding, tempestuous offering injects a fierce late-70s hard rock sheen and labyrinthine prog riffs, reaching a fiery crescendo. Sidestepping themes

HEAVY METAL PETS



HEAVY METAL PETS

Cats, dogs, goats, ponies... ducks?
Here are metal's finest and their animal BFFs



BENTLEY & MOTLEY

NITA STRAUSS

Who is this with you?

"These are our rescue dogs, Bentley and Motley – our crazy cat Pantera is not pictured."

How did they get their names?

"Motley's name has a cute story. I got her from a wonderful organisation called Motley Zoo, while on tour with Mötley Crüe! So the name seemed very appropriate."

When did you get them?

"I've had all of them from babies. Bentley is 13 years, Motley is 10, Pantera is four."

What's the naughtiest thing they've ever done?

"They're perfect!"

What's the best thing about them?

"The pups come on tour with my solo band, and anyone in the touring world will tell you that bus dogs are the best. It's so fun having them around, cuddling in the bunk at night and generally bringing the good vibes."

What do they think about touring?

"The girls are excellent road dogs. Very comfortable on planes and buses, no fuss at all. We're very lucky."

Do you talk to them? And do they talk back?

"I talk to them constantly! I wish they could talk back. Anyone that doesn't talk to their pets is a psychopath."

What's the one tip you'd give to anyone thinking of getting dogs?

"No tips necessary! Our dogs are so easy-going and fun. Just enjoy the companionship."

What's the best thing about having a pet generally?

"It's like having a cute friend that you never fight with and is always happy just to be near you."

Is there anything else you want to add about what it's like being a pet owner in the music industry?

"If you're a musician and you're thinking of taking your dogs on tour, do it! And start them a tour Instagram account to document it all, like I have at @bentleyandmotley."

"ANYONE WHO DOESN'T TALK TO THEIR PETS IS A PSYCHOPATH"



WILHELMINA, RINGO & ARCTURUS

CAMMIE GILBERT-BEVERLY AND DOBBER BEVERLY
(OCEANS OF SLUMBER)

Who's in your photo?

Cammie: "We have our blue tuxedo, Wilhelmina; Ringo our tripod; and Arcturus our Maine Coon."

What's the best thing about them?

Dobber: "Wilhelmina is an absolute psycho, a real cat's cat, which means she's amazing and knocks stuff off the wall constantly. She terrorises Ringo, and I think that may be why his leg fell off – joking, of course, he was an alcoholic logging dog and lost it in a freak accident. Arcturus is a big sad boy with a super high-pitched meow, so he's a joy to listen to and throw back scratches on."

When did they enter your life?

Cammie: "Ringo has been in my life for about 12 years. Arcturus was the first cat that Dobber and I got as a couple, and has been with us for about six years. Wilhelmina is the newest addition, having been with us for two years."

What's the most infuriating thing they do?

Cammie: "Arcturus is a cord chewer. He's definitely ruined some cables, chargers and power cords. We have to be careful leaving anything out for his safety and our sanity."

Do you talk to them, and do they talk back to you?

Cammie: "I talk to them all the time. Ringo whines a lot, fusses, asks to go outside, or what I am eating, and is always proclaiming his discontent or interest in something."

Wilhelmina is always chattering or screaming about needing to come look at something she's noticed, or that she thinks her food dish is getting a little too low. The only quiet one is Arcturus. He has the most precious quiet meow."

What advice would you give to anyone thinking of getting a cat?

Dobber: "Just do it. Bring some cat energy into your life or get a barking cat like Ringo and have a little colour brought into your world. Just get a robot litter box, for sure."

"ARCTURUS IS A CORD CHEWER. HE RUINS CHARGERS, POWER CABLES..."



NEWT
JAY POSTONES
(TESSERACTION)

Who's this?
"Newt, the goat. We have two – Newt and Ripley. I'm a huge *Aliens* fan."

What's the best thing about goats?
"They're hilarious and surprisingly sweet. Feeding them bananas and cherry tomatoes is one of the best experiences anyone could ever hope for in life."

What's the naughtiest thing they've ever done?
"Apart from eating every plant in our garden, I've been knocked down a couple of times when they get the zoomies – I've ended up on my ass."

What would you tell someone who wants to get a goat?
"A load of plants are toxic to goats, so look them up and remove them ahead of time."

Have the goats ever been on tour with you?
"I wish!"

BARNABUS
ASH COSTELLO (NEW YEARS DAY)



Who's this with you?
"Barnabus. He's named after Barnabus Collins, a vampire from the 1960s gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows*. His little fangs made me feel he looked like Barnabus Collins."

What's the best thing about Barnabus?
"His compassionate and caring demeanour. I had a dog psychic do a reading for him once and she said he feels that he is the protector of the house. He takes this job very seriously and cares very deeply for the safety of the ones he loves."

Do you talk to him?
"Constantly. We talk about everything and anything. The psychic said he understands me and tries to talk back, and gets frustrated that I can't understand him sometimes."

What's your advice on dogs?
"Please adopt, don't shop! Say no to breeders and don't be afraid to adopt an older dog!"



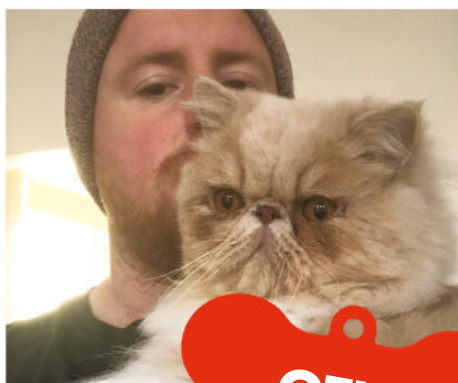
IGGY & LEGO
CHARLOTTE WESSELS

Who are these animals?
"Iggy is our elderly kitten, she's almost 15 now. Lego is a three-year old rescue from Greece."

When did you get them?
"We got Iggy in 2009. We didn't know if Iggy would accept another pet, let alone a dog. So we opted to foster. We took Lego in and introduced him very slowly and carefully. He completely stole our hearts."

What's the best thing about them?
"I spend a lot of time alone in the basement home studio and love it when there's a cat on my desk and a dog at my feet – they are true companions."

Do you talk to them? Do they talk back?
"Are there people who don't talk to their pets? Yes, and yes, obviously."



OTIS
JOE NALLY (URNE)

Who's your pet?
"This is Otis, and he's a cross between a Persian and an exotic breed. The only long-haired cat in his litter."

Where does the name come from?
"I am a big soul fan, and Otis Redding is one of my heroes."

What's the best thing about Otis the cat?
"The face! So much personality, albeit a very sulky one."

What's the naughtiest thing he's ever done?
"He had a very, very bad belly once. It caused a lot of chaos! It happens to the best of us, but he rolled around in it."

Do you talk to Otis, and if so, what do you say? And does he talk back?
"I literally talk to him like he is human. And he is very vocal back."



QUACKY
MEGAN TARGETT
(VEXED)

Who's this?
"This is Quacky. He's an Indian Runner duck and he's four years old in May."

When did Quacky come into your life?
"We've always wanted pet ducks, so during lockdown we decided to give it a go. We now have 19 ducks, all with names and different personalities."

What's the best thing about them?
"They're such happy animals and they have a great sense of humour – they love to play games and tease each other too."

What tip would you give to anyone getting a duck?
"They're really sensitive animals and like to have lots of affection, so be prepared to treat a duck like a dog with wings."

Who's your companion?
"This is Daisy, a miniature Shetland pony."

How did she enter your life?
"A friend of Meg's [Megan Targett, Vexed bandmate/partner] rescues animals and we saw a photo of Daisy and pretty much fell in love with her."

What's the best thing about her?
"Her attitude. Shetland ponies are notoriously mischievous and will nip you and push you. Once you get to know her she is the sweetest creature."

And what's the naughtiest thing Daisy has done?
"She's a pro escape artist. Meg often gets a phone call from the neighbour saying that Daisy is on the road again."

What tip would you give to anyone who is thinking about getting a Shetland pony?
"Be prepared for all sorts of antics but be patient. If you ever feel that you can't take care of an animal, there is no shame in rehoming."

DAISY
WILLEM MASON-GERAGHTY (VEXED)



HEAVY METAL PETS

Who's your friend?

"Elvira, my mutt from Romania. She's named after Elvira, Mistress Of The Dark."

When did Elvira come into your life?

"I adopted her in spring 2022 via a Romanian rescue organisation that found her and her two brothers as babies abandoned in a forest. She's quite possibly a vampire, hence her bat-like appearance."

What's the best thing about living with Elvira?

"She's become my best friend. Just cuddles, treats and long walks in the woods. No hidden agendas. I tell her all my secrets and she knows how to keep them."

What's the one tip you'd give to anyone who's considering getting a dog?

"If you can provide a good home to an animal in need, do it! It was one of the best decisions of my life."

ELVIRA

JOHANNA PLATOW
ANDERSSON
(LUCIFER)



Who's this?

"Mervyn, a not-quite-pedigree British Shorthair cat. He's named after Mervyn Peake, author of the *Gormenghast* trilogy."

What's the best thing about Mervyn?

"He's my animal familiar, and has many magical abilities such as snoozing upside down and making an 'ek ek ek' sound at cobwebs."

Do you talk to Mervyn? And does he talk back?

"I mostly talk to him in a private feline language of my own construction."

What's the one tip you'd give to anyone thinking of getting a cat like Mervyn?

"Don't expect a 'thank you'."

What's the best thing about having a pet generally?

"Having someone to eat and digest me when I die – a rotting corpse is so unchic."

MERVYN

TOM TEMPLAR
(GREEN LUNG)

Who is this in your photos?

"Cash, Nova and Vindaloo. Our rescued Staffordshire mixes."

Where do their names come from?

"Cash is short for Cashew – he is fucking nuts. Nova is a supermassive black hole that eats everything, and Vindaloo was named for my love of curries."

What's the best thing about them?

"The unconditional love! And Cash is the best hiking companion ever."

And the naughtiest?

"Their chewing habits. Cash ate a plank of our wood floor, Nova ate a coffee table and a dining room chair, and Vindaloo's eaten three pairs of shoes, including a \$500 set of custom orthotics."

What tip would you give to anyone thinking of getting a dog?

"Train them. It's time-consuming, but it's completely worth it for the love they give!"

**CASH, NOVA
& VINDALOO**

ADAM D (KILLSWITCH ENGAGE)

SHARON

MANTAS (VENOM INC.)

Who's your pal?

"This is Sharon. She was a stray, but she has certain Ragdoll qualities."

Why Sharon?

"At the time I found her we already had a male house cat called Ozzy, so it was destined to be."

What's the naughtiest thing Sharon has ever done?

"I went to take a shower one day and the water was freezing cold. The boiler casing was removed to reveal tiny little teeth marks – Sharon had chewed through the ignition wires."

You run a cat sanctuary with your wife. What's that like?

"I have 27 cats and I can honestly say that each one of them has a different and unique personality. Sometimes they have their 'rock star' moments and trash everything, but it's what I signed up for."

Who's this with you?

"These are our two Miniature Dachshunds. They're called Luna and Indie."

What's the best thing about them?

"They are just the most loving dogs and they're so much fun to be around."

What's the most infuriating thing Luna and Indie do?

"Dachshunds are notorious for barking, so when the delivery driver comes to the door it's pure fucking Armageddon. They make great guard dogs, though."

Have they ever been on tour with you?

"No. They're not the type of dogs to just chill out, so they would be running up and down the bus causing havoc 24/7."

What's the best thing about having a pet?

"Coming home from tour is always the best, when I see them both running around going absolutely crazy."

**LUNA
& INDIE**

DAVIE PROVAN
(BLEED FROM WITHIN)

**LUNA
& JAXX**

SOPHIE LLOYD

Who are these fluffballs?

"Luna, a Ragdoll, and Jaxx, a Siberian."

Where do their names come from?

"Luna is quite a mystical name, and she looks like some magical creature. Jaxx is named after the lead character in *Sons Of Anarchy*."

What's the best thing about them?

"Jaxx is the most loving cat I've ever met. Sometimes he stares so deep into my eyes I feel like we've known each other in another life. Luna is so intelligent – she always knows

when something's wrong and is always there for us when we need her."

What's the naughtiest thing Jaxx and Luna have ever done?

"Jaxx has IBS, so when we first got him, we would wake up to shit everywhere. He also won't let us have anything on the side without knocking it off. The bigger the mess he can make, the better."

Do you talk to them?

"I think I talk to them more than I talk to any human."



KYLO

JULIAN GAGE (HERIOT)

Who are you hugging?

"This is Kylo. He's seven years old and half Ragdoll. We don't know what the other half is, but it's another big breed, 'cos he's huge."

He looks very black metal.

"He looks pretty tough, but he's cute as well."

A TikTok of Kylo trying to drink water from a tap went viral. What's the story behind it?

"We posted a video of him drinking from a tap, but none of the water was going in his mouth, it was running off his head. It was the stupidest thing. Then we woke up the next morning and my girlfriend's phone was going absolutely mental, the video was getting millions of hits. So we started putting stuff up on TikTok and Instagram, and it went crazy from there."

What's the reaction been?

"Loads are really positive, but some people think he's got some kind of issue where he can't drink. But he's absolutely fine. It's just the way the video is shot - he does actually drink eventually, he just lets it run off his head first. And he does it every day - it's not just a thing he did once."

Have you had any cat casting agents contact you?

"Yeah. He was on Japanese breakfast TV at one point. He's been on the Channel 4 show *The Last Leg*. There was a point where we were getting sent loads of free food. For Kylo, obviously, not us."

What's it like having a cat that's more famous than your band?

"I'm used to it. My girlfriend tells me every day that the band will never be as famous as the cat." **H**

**“THE BAND
WILL NEVER BE
AS FAMOUS AS
THE CAT”**

BULLET VS TRIVIUM

THE CLASH OF

In 2025, Bullet For My Valentine arenas to play their debut albums their shared history, and what to

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS



THE TITANS!

and Trivium will co-headline in full. We grilled the Matts on expect when they hit the stage



It's the collab we already knew we needed. By the time you read this, the news of Trivium and Bullet For My Valentine's 2025 co-headline arena tour will have well and truly broken. And the not-so-small print? Not only is it the first time the two bands have ever toured together, but they'll celebrate the 20th anniversary of their 2005 breakthrough, era-defining albums, *Ascendancy* (released March 15, 2005) and *The Poison* (released October 3, 2005), by playing them in full. Two words: Get. In.

What better excuse could there be to get Matt Heafy and Matt Tuck, the frontmen of two of modern metal's most successful bands, together to chat about the similar paths they've blazed through our scene, their memories, and their plans for what promises to be a metal event for the ages.

When did you first hear each other's bands?

Matt Heafy: "We were in the UK on our second or first tour. I was blown away by Bullet. It was really cool to hear another band that was coming out around the same time, that was taking the ingredients that we were influenced by as well, but cooking them in a different way."

Matt Tuck: "It was early 2005 and we had just finished recording *The Poison*. It was all the sounds, aggression, speed and technicality of a band that I wanted to hear and what Bullet wanted to be like. As soon as I heard of you boys, I was a fan. I repped you as much as I could in press photos, talked about you any time I was asked, 'Who are you listening to at the moment?'"

Do you remember the first time you met in person?

Tuck: "It was behind the second stage at [German rock festival] Rock Am Ring."

Heafy: "Oh, that's right!"

Tuck: "I saw you and Corey [Beaulieu, Trivium guitarist] come walking in the bus area and you were like, 'Hey, man, just want to thank you for picking up our band in the press,' and likewise. I still remember that interaction to this day, over 20 years later."

You both broke through in 2005, a period when metal was in transition. Nu metal had bitten the dust and bands like Killswitch Engage and Lamb Of God were leading a metal renaissance. What are your memories of the scene at that time?

Tuck: "It was undeniably a period of time where both our bands started something that was important. We were breaking away from a trend and a mould, bringing back a certain style and aggression, a technicality. We were representing Britain, and Trivium were representing the US."

Heafy: "It was an interesting time. Guitar solos were gone when I was in high school, and nu metal was in. Growing up in central Florida, pop-punk was the only style that was really around."

Tuck: "It was an amazing time for both our bands. That whole period where it was young, fresh and new, people were discovering us, and we were trying to stamp our sound into the metal community. I can't emphasise how much we enjoyed it and how hungry we were."

Heafy: "The New Wave Of American Heavy Metal scene was growing with bands like Lamb Of God, Shadows Fall, Unearth and Killswitch Engage all coming out of roughly the same area, at the same time. But it was always Bullet and Trivium floating. And that's why I always felt this kinship."

So, there was never any kind of rivalry between your bands?

Tuck: "No!"

Heafy: "We've always just lived on these two separate planets. Acknowledging each other and being fans of each other's music, but never connecting the dots. We could have done this tour at 10 years, could have done it at 15, could have done it at five. We've been asking each other, 'Why haven't we toured together?' And there wasn't a reason, we just didn't."

It is strange that you haven't toured together until now...

Heafy: "We've done festivals, but we've never done a proper, real tour together. Which is nuts, because we've toured with everyone."

Do you remember the moment you both knew you'd made it?

Tuck: "Selling out Brixton Academy on your first album is a pretty cool achievement. And at that point as well, *Tears Don't Fall* wasn't even a single. And from that moment, it just didn't stop. It went from Brixton to Hammersmith, Hammersmith to Alexandra Palace, Alexandra Palace to Wembley, and it just kept going. What a wild ride."

Heafy: "Before we toured the UK, no one liked us. We were an opening band, playing first of four, selling one t-shirt, one CD a night. We had just finished a US run, flew over to the UK, and we're at Wulfrun Hall [in Wolverhampton]. We hear this sound. We peek behind the curtain. It's a Trivium chant in the crowd and it's a sold-out show. We go out there, they knew every single word. Then [Download Festival organiser] Andy Copping saw us at the Garage show in London and he said, 'Let's bump you up from the tent stage to the main stage for Download 2005.'"

Matt, did you watch Trivium's now-infamous 2005 Download set? (Bullet For My Valentine played the second stage that year, sandwiched between Lamb Of God and Meshuggah.)

Tuck: "No, unfortunately we didn't get on site in time, and

it had already happened. But I remember the entire festival backstage talking about this Trivium set and it was like, 'Oh shit, the hype machine is real.'"

How did you deal with the increased attention following the release of your albums?

Heafy: "It was tough for me. People were like, 'Oh Matt's kind of a jerk because he doesn't want to be around people.' But I had terrible acne and social anxiety disorder, so I didn't want to be in pictures, didn't want to meet people. But that was immersion therapy. I had to just get in it, had to do it, and eventually got over it."

Tuck: "I don't think it's ever something I struggled with. It's something I'd wanted since I was 14 years old, so I was in a really happy place. I didn't go over the top with my ego or anything, I was always very confident, but I remember feeling validated that I'd worked so hard. I knew I was capable of something special."

Heafy: "I wish I'd sat back and just smelled the roses for a minute. It's not that I was grumpy, it's just that it was happening so quick, we had to put our heads down and work. I see that sometimes nowadays for bands, and I hope that they're relishing it. But it's hard to do when you're in the moment."

Tuck: "We were guilty of the same thing. We weren't enjoying it or taking it in, we were just doing it and living it."

"IT'D BE A MISSED OPPORTUNITY IF WE DIDN'T RECORD A SONG TOGETHER"

MATT TUCK

Trivium and Bullet For My
Valentine... together on tour...
playing their debut albums...
Pardon us while we lose our shit



Matt Heafy, a well-hydrated metal titan



What were the challenges back then?

Heafy: "I would never change the downs, because the downs are what made us strong and what made us realise who we are. The *Ascendancy* period was where we were praised. Then *The Crusade* [the band's poorly received second album, released in 2006] was kind of tough, but then we built and wrote out of that."

Tuck: "You go from playing once a week in a rehearsal room with your friends, to touring the world and playing huge festivals in the blink of an eye. It's a steep learning curve. As enjoyable as it all was, there were times where I was in a very dark, low place because I felt like things were being taken away from me by my own misdoings with my voice, drinking and smoking and all that stuff you do when you're young and stupid. I don't miss the naivety and the inexperience, but would never change it for the world."

Matt, last November, you joined Bullet onstage in Orlando to perform *Tears Don't Fall*. What was that experience like?

Heafy: "I had a blast. I was like, 'I'm going to let it all rip. I don't have a show tomorrow. I'm going to blow my voice out.' I was sweating so bad after just one song..."

Tuck: "...You do sweat, man. I remember, 'God damn, you've done, like, four minutes here!'"

"WE'RE GOING TO MAKE THIS THE EVENT IT NEEDS TO BE. I WANT TO WATCH BOTH SETS!"

MATT HEAFY

Heafy: "I gave it my absolute all, man. You should see me in jiu-jitsu. Sometimes my sweat is going in my partner's mouth, their nose. I think I'm just very well hydrated."

How did the idea come about for the joint 20-year anniversary tour and playing both albums in full?

Tuck: "It was around October last year. Me and the boys wanted to do something for *The Poison* and it just clicked. Let's see if Trivium want to jump onboard here and do something together, split everything down the middle, no bullshit, co-headline, *Ascendancy* and *The Poison*."

Heafy: "I remember we had a text from our manager. He's like, 'Hey, the Bullet camp just put over the idea of Trivium and Bullet doing a tour together in 2025...'"

Tuck: "I think a Bullet and Trivium tour is something that most fans of that era would want to see. It's taken us 20 years to get there, but instead of just a normal tour, we're bringing something special. I think people are going to flip when they find out what's going on."

Can you tell us anything about what you have planned?

Heafy: "We've been creating all sorts of assets. Cool, creative stuff. Matt came down to The Hangar [Trivium's Florida HQ] and maybe next month, we're going to go visit

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“IT’S GOING TO BE A HAVE-TO-BE-THERE KIND OF EVENT. IT’LL ONLY HAPPEN ONE TIME”

MATT TUCK

them. We’re going to make this the event that it needs to be. I want to see the show. I don’t want to have to play it. I want to watch both sets from both bands because it’s going to be something momentous.”

Tuck: “I can’t see anyone that was part of the metal scene in 2005 that won’t want to come to this and celebrate and enjoy the evening with us. It’s going to be a have-to-be-there kind of event, because it’s only going to happen one time.”

Heafy: “I mentioned the tour to [Malevolence guitarist] Josh Baines, and he’s like, ‘That’s my childhood.’ You see how thriving and how strong and healthy the UK scene is right now, how many amazing bands are coming out. You talk to them and the first bands they saw live were Bullet and Trivium.”

Bullet played *The Poison* in full in 2016 for the album’s 10th anniversary, but have Trivium ever played *Ascendancy* in full?

Heafy: “We’ve never done it on a show. We’ve never done it on a tour. It’s going to be something special. I think that people are going to lose their minds. I know I am!”

Would you ever record a song together?

Heafy: “Yes, absolutely.”

Is it in the pipeline?

Heafy: “Ha ha ha! I can’t confirm or not.”

Tuck: “It’s something we’ve discussed. It would seem like a missed opportunity if we didn’t do something together, especially for this tour. I would assume it’s going to happen. We haven’t started working on anything yet. Matt’s being shy and coy, but I’ll just say how it is.”

What do you think the legacy of *Ascendancy* and *The Poison* is?

Heafy: “It’s very cool to see the blueprint that was laid by our two bands; singing, screaming, guitar solos, great rhythm playing. Also, young fans wanted to dress like us and make music like us and cover our songs.”

Tuck: “I hope we continue to inspire young musicians and bands to pick up these instruments, be creative, have fun, enjoy themselves. I think I could speak for Matt when we say both albums shaped a huge part of our musical culture and everyone that listened to them at the time.”

Heafy: “After this tour, I assume festivals will be calling both our bands begging for these full album plays and then maybe at the 25-year, 30-year mark, let’s do some gigantic stuff. It’s got me set for the future, but I’m going to have a note in front of my face on my bunk every day: enjoy this, relish this, and just sit back and celebrate.” **H**

BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE AND TRIVIUM CO-HEADLINE UK ARENAS FROM JANUARY 26, 2025. FOR DATES, SEE BULLETFORMYVALENTINE.COM AND TRIVIUM.ORG



Matt Tuck is planning on savouring every moment of this tour. We couldn't agree more

KEVIN NIXON

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NINE INCH NAILS

How The Downward Spiral Changed Everything

Thirty years after it was released, the legacy of Nine Inch Nails' second album is huge. Members of Linkin Park, Code Orange, Health and more dive into Trent Reznor's dark masterpiece

WORDS: SAM COARE



In the spring of 1997, US current affairs magazine *Time* published a cover story on the 25 Most Influential People in America. Nestled unexpectedly among heavyweight names from the worlds of politics, science and sport sat that of a man whose music, the publication wrote, “is filthy, brutish stuff, oozing with aberrant sex, suicidal melancholy and violent misanthropy”.

How, middle-class America could be forgiven for asking, as it thumbed through the issue in question, had it come to this: where the name Trent Reznor, of a band called Nine Inch Nails, was sharing column inches with US Secretaries Of State present and future?

The answer was *The Downward Spiral*. Released three years prior, Nine Inch Nails’ second album may not have been on the radar of the majority of *Time* readers, but the roots that had grown from its dank, dark depths had sunk themselves deep into the foundations of popular culture.

A concept album exploring one man’s self-destruction, *The Downward Spiral*’s challenging fusion of industrial metal with borrowings from noise, ambient, electronic, drone and alternative scenes was as complex as its subject matter, and antithetical to the heavy music world from which it was born.

Released 30 years ago this month, *The Downward Spiral* debuted at No.2 on the Billboard charts, positioning Nine Inch Nails as the new industrial face of alternative music. It would also subsequently turn Trent Reznor into a deeply uncomfortable superstar, positioning him as a new poster boy for music fans seeking to fill the void left by the recent death of Kurt Cobain.

The Downward Spiral is that rarest of things: a record of immediate impact, and of even greater lasting legacy; both defined by its time, and defining of it. Deeply layered, richly textured and disguising a multitude of secrets – from dozens upon dozens of twisted samples, to manipulated instrumentals, reversed sounds, hushed lyrics and more – as the album celebrates its 30th anniversary, it continues to enthrall and confound in equal measure.

“It is the unquestionable Mount Everest of industrial music,” says Jake Duzsik, frontman of Health, a band that collaborated with NIN in 2021 on the track *Isn’t Everyone*. “But it is bigger than that genre, too. It is unparalleled in its importance.”

The concept for *The Downward Spiral* began taking shape in Trent Reznor’s mind in the summer of 1991. Nine Inch Nails’ 1989 debut album, *Pretty Hate Machine* – ostensibly a synth-pop record strutting atop an industrial metal undercurrent – had marked them out as exciting, if not hugely original, up-and-comers. For their second act, Trent envisaged a labyrinthine, cinematic exploration of the depression and addiction he himself was battling. In a notebook, the frontman sketched out “the story of someone trying to find salvation through sex and drugs and self-destruction and self-loathing, and trying to find purpose and reason”, as he told Netflix’s *Song Exploder* programme in 2020.

To achieve his vision, Trent needed two things: space and a supportive partner. He found the former in a rented house at 10050 Cielo Drive, high up in California’s Beverly Hills, building a home studio in which he could conceive his ideas. Trent would christen it ‘Le Pig’, after belatedly learning that the address was the location of the infamous murders of actress Sharon Tate and her friends by the followers of Charles Manson (murderer Susan Atkins scrawled ‘Pig’ in Sharon’s blood on the front door of the house).

A partner would be found in Interscope Records boss Jimmy Iovine, who moved heaven and earth to rescue the band from the contractual hell they were embroiled in withTVT Records, the label that had released *Pretty Hate Machine* and then virtually disowned it.

After nearly two years of pained gestation and long periods of writer’s block, Jimmy’s reward for handing Trent creative freedom – not to mention his own label imprint, Nothing Records – was what the musician deemed “a small-scale, personal, potentially ugly record”, which he “felt sorry for them having to try [to] sell”.

But sell it Interscope did – and then some, to the tune of some four million copies to date. The industrial stomp of *March Of The Pigs* made for an obvious first single, a Nine Inch Nails calling card that remains one of their most iconic songs. Less obvious, to everyone other than Jimmy, was the choice of *Closer* as the album’s second focus track. Despite Trent’s fears that the song’s ‘I want to fuck you like an animal’ refrain was trite, Jimmy saw the song as a radio smash – with a choice edit, of course. Accompanied by a controversial music video featuring crucified monkeys, severed pigs’ heads and scenes of BDSM, *Closer* quickly became NIN’s most successful single to date, landing on mainstream charts the world over.

Such success was at odds with prevailing trends. The grunge goldrush was still in effect – *The Downward Spiral* was kept off the No.1 spot in the US by Soundgarden’s *Superunknown*, released on the same day. The beginnings of the pop-punk boom, soon to explode with Green Day’s *Dookie* and The Offspring’s *Smash*, was bubbling to the surface. Pantera were staunchly holding the 90s metal fort – *Far Beyond Driven*, released two weeks after *The Downward Spiral*, would reach No.1. Misanthropy meant big bucks, but few offered the heart that sat alongside the hurt in such a way as *The Downward Spiral* and Trent Reznor.

“The 90s felt like a time when No.1 records could be so aggressive and provocative,” says Jake Duzsik. “But there was also an over-simplified masculinity to rock music that was communicating toughness and edginess and all these things that were antithetical to *The Downward Spiral*. It’s complex, androgynous, vulnerable and honest. It communicates emotion so profoundly, which I think

is part of what has touched people in a timeless way.”

“*The Downward Spiral* crossed the boundaries in terms of what music like this could sound like,” says Linkin Park’s Mike Shinoda, a ‘day one’ Nine Inch Nails fan. “Beyond rock and industrial, Trent was utilising elements of hip hop, weird funky sounds, real soulfulness, even references to Pink Floyd. The dynamics of the songwriting were risky in a way that I don’t think people managed before or have managed since.”

The Downward Spiral was more just than an unlikely commercial juggernaut. It marked Trent Reznor’s first experiments in creating sounds that could lurk within his music to elicit a subliminal response.

“I’d been thinking about sound design in films,” he revealed in *Song Exploder*. “How it can make you feel uncomfortable by hiding something in there that subconsciously can make you feel a certain way... to emotionally set the stage for what I was trying to get across.”

“The sound design of that record is an enormous inspiration,” says Code Orange’s Jami Morgan, who worked with former Nine Inch Nails drummer/*The Downward Spiral* programmer Chris Vrenna on his own band’s 2019

**“THE ALBUM IS
UNPARALLELED IN
ITS IMPORTANCE”**

JAKE DUZSIK, HEALTH

NINE INCH NAILS

Trent Reznor onstage at London's
Forum, May 24, 1994



NINE INCH NAILS

Trent Reznor's "personal, potentially ugly record" became a huge success



album, *Underneath*. “Though it moves through different genres, there is a sonic identity that is instrumental to the story. There are these thematic melodies that build throughout, which take you on a journey. It all adds up to this very particular emotional ambience.”

“If you listen to that record from start to finish, it’s completely immersive,” adds Jake Duzsik. “It creates a very cinematic sort of backdrop – which is obviously something that David Fincher recognised in it.”

Fincher, director of the classic 1999 movie *Fight Club*, would enlist the Nine Inch Nails frontman to score 2010’s *The Social Network*, the story of the birth of Facebook. Trent had prior experience in that world, compiling the soundtrack to Oliver Stone’s 1994 serial killer satire *Natural Born Killers* and collaborating with director David Lynch on the music for 1997’s mind-warping *Lost Highway*, but *The Social Network* was his first original score. It found him drawing on techniques he had explored on *The Downward Spiral*, inflecting an almost entirely electronic and suitably cold score with the repeating piano motif of *Hand Covers Bruise* to hint at the loss of morality that was central to the story.

Fight Club itself had a deep connection to *The Downward Spiral*. Chuck Palahniuk, author of the novel on which the movie was based, revealed that it was written with the album “playing on repeat in the background”. The novel’s themes of nihilism, anti-consumerism and rage unsurprisingly reflected many central tenets of the album exploding from Chuck’s headphones.

In time, *Fight Club* would be wrongly held up in a darker light, drawing criticism for its seeming glorification of a male aggression and violence that pockmarked 90s America. Indeed, five years after its release, *The Downward Spiral* itself would be examined during the investigation into the Columbine school shootings of 1999, as the shooters had referenced it in their private journals. The track *Big Man With A Gun* had been intended as an admonishment of such themes, Trent describing the song as “a parody of the whole super-macho misogyny thing”.

Still, such was the cultural top-table seat *The Downward Spiral* took upon its release that Trent would soon be defending his work against attacks from senators within the right-wing Republican Party, who decried its lyrics as morally bankrupting American’s youth.

Even before *The Downward Spiral*, Nine Inch Nails had inspired soundalike bands, among them Filter, featuring former Nine Inch Nails live guitarist Richard Patrick. But the wave of imitators only accelerated after it was released, with the likes of Gravity Kills and Sister Machine Gun clutching at its coat-tails. Ridiculously, Mötley Crüe would swap spandex for trench coats and cod-industrial beats on 1997’s derided *Generation Swine* album, while even Judas Priest’s Rob Halford turned in a NIN-indebted solo album under the name Two (released on Trent’s Nothing Records). Incredibly, Axl Rose was also rumoured to be considering making a Reznor-inspired solo album (in his defence, he was a long-time fan of the band, even inviting them to open for Guns N’ Roses at Wembley Stadium in 1991).

Yet *The Downward Spiral* didn’t simply funnel bands into a Nine Inch Nails-shaped genre mould, it also told other artists that it was OK to shatter genre moulds completely. Six months after its release, Korn would lay the foundations for a nu metal scene that would similarly throw caution to the wind of convention. In 1997, *Spin*

magazine crowned Trent Reznor as “the most vital artist in music”, and one who was as readily responsible for the “mainstream acceptance of techno and electronica” as much as industrial metal.

Conversely, when ailing country icon Johnny Cash covered *The Downward Spiral*’s anthemic album-closer *Hurt* in 2002, he lent the song a new resonance and reach of its own. Cash authentically reframed the record’s conflicted emotional coda on life and love in the context of the latter stage of his life.

Trent admitted to *Alternative Press* that he felt that *Hurt* “isn’t mine anymore. I wrote some words and music in my bedroom as a way of staying sane, about a bleak and desperate place I was in. Some-fucking-how that winds up reinterpreted by a legend from a different genre and era, and still retains sincerity and meaning – different, but every bit as pure.”

Today, *The Downward Spiral* stands not simply as one of modern metal’s most defining albums, but as a monolith entirely of its own. The work continues to serve as a blueprint for bands that want to build something far bigger and more meaningful than a simple album – be that Poppy’s all-encompassing, genre-distorting universe, or Parkway Drive’s structural and conceptual template for 2022’s *Darker Still* LP.

Trent Reznor’s ability to craft not only a distinctive sound, but a distinctive world on *The Downward Spiral* has made it the North Star for Jami Morgan, with Code Orange using music, visuals, videos and artwork as “puzzle pieces” of a bigger picture. For Jami – and, indeed, Mike Shinoda – that all began with *The Downward Spiral*’s front cover and inner packaging, a mixed-media body of work by British artist Russell Mills, in which he incorporated his own blood, rusted metal and dead insects into his canvases.

“The album’s visual identity – including how the band presented themselves, and in their live show, too – felt as instrumental to the story being told as its musical one,” says Jami. “It was a story you could connect to on so many different levels. There’s not been a record since that has managed to do all of that at once. And everything that we’ve tried to do in Code Orange has been deeply inspired by that.”

“I think the coherence of *The Downward Spiral* is the fact that it’s Trent at the centre of it all,” says Poppy, who holds the album up as one of her gateways into heavy music. “If you’re making a project of your own design, your identity is across it, from the lyrics to the way it breathes. To me it serves as a testament to doing what entertains you with no borders.”

Thirty years on, it’s perhaps that which continues to stand *The Downward Spiral* in good stead. It remains a record without equal, in sound, design or production – a truly unique and unparalleled release, even within the storied Nine Inch Nails canon.

“What continues to fascinate me about that album is that, even now, you simply don’t understand how it was made,” Health’s Jake Duzsik says. “You can take an album like *Nevermind* or *Hybrid Theory*, and it’s banger after banger. But you don’t listen to those wondering how they were made, or what the fuck that sound is, or how those vocal melodies were written. To retain so much mystery but to touch people so deeply on an emotional level, it’s just astonishing.”

“People have been trying to copy or emulate that record in some way ever since,” adds Jami Morgan. “But what they never can match is the songwriting at its heart.” **H**

“IT WAS A STORY YOU COULD CONNECT TO”

JAMI MORGAN, CODE ORANGE

CHELSEA WOLFE



The Witching Hour

Come with us as we take a dive into
LA's weirdest and most wonderful
bookstore. Our guide: goth-doom
queen and explorer of the 'spiritual
realm', Chelsea Wolfe

WORDS: STEVE APPLEFORD • PICTURES: STEPHANIE CABRAL





Chelsea Wolfe knows her way around a bookstore. Just watch as she moves quickly down the aisles and up the stairs, a mystery woman in layers of gothic black in search of something spiritual and witchy in the most eccentric literary establishment in downtown Los Angeles. She hasn't been to The Last Bookstore in years, but has suggested it as a good place

to meet and browse the shelves while she's in town preparing for the release of her seventh album, *She Reaches Out To She Reaches Out To She*.

Over the last few years, the singer and guitarist has been increasingly open about her interests in the spiritual realm.

"In the witchcraft community we get excited when someone who's either an artist or a creative is open about it – an open witch basically out of the broom closet," she says, standing tall on laced-up boots, a quartet of dark braids draping over her shoulders. "It's actually exciting. We want to support each other, because it's not always easy to be open about that kind of thing."

Upstairs is where things get weird. There are bookcases organised not by subject or author, but by colour – with entire shelves filled with red books, another for blue books,

another for yellow. She glides through a tunnel made of old books glued together like bricks, past a bank vault filled with true crime and horror, and a sign that warns: 'You are entering the labyrinth above The Last Bookstore.'

Chelsea lived in Los Angeles

for more than six years, in a neighbourhood just outside downtown. The Last Bookstore was a frequent destination for her back then. We're now standing in the 'Religion And New Age' section. Right beside her is an Egyptian sarcophagus made of plaster, looking rather more like a movie prop than a beloved mummy's solemn pathway to the afterlife. The surface of the sarcophagus is painted in regal shades of purple, white and gold. Just steps away is an old birdcage inhabited only by a brass human skull and a metal statue of a raven.

"I worked at a bookstore when I was in high school, so I got really used to just looking at the spines of all the books and intuitively pulling one out and often it being something that I was actually drawn to," she says happily of her teenage years in Sacramento, California, sliding a book off a shelf. "I loved it. It was just a messy little old bookstore."

While the witchcraft selection here isn't as big as she had hoped or recalled, there are shelves filled with a range of esoteric titles old and new. There are books on magick and the occult, cosmology and modern sorcery. One shelf includes *A Modern Guide to Heathenry* and a copy of *Initiatic Eroticism*, a collection of occult writings by the Satanic high priestess Maria de Naglowska. Occultist Aleister Crowley stares balefully from the cover of another book.

The volume already in Chelsea's arms is a copy of *Pronoia Is The Antidote For Paranoia* by Rob Breznsky, an astrologer and musician based in Northern California. The subtitle reads: *How The Whole World Is Conspiring To Shower You With*

Blessings. The cover image depicts a maze leading to a flaming heart in its centre.

"I've been following this author on Instagram," she explains. "Looking through the spirituality section, I wasn't recognising a lot of the authors they have here. So I closed my eyes for a second and I was like, 'Please show me the right book,' just asking the spirit universe," she adds with a laugh. "And then I saw this one – I was like, yes. I wanted to pick this up."

She has always been interested what she calls "the spiritual realm", picking up books and getting into tarot cards when she was in her early 20s. But it wasn't until her 30s that she got serious about "different areas of study of witchcraft" and other corners of the spiritual.

"I would say that my path is more nature-based, earth-based – animism," she says, aligning herself with the metaphysical belief that all things – animals, plants, the earth, etc – have a sentient, spiritual essence.

Walking the aisles, *Hammer* mentions a book of photography by William Mortensen, whose evocative work in the 1920s and 30s ranged from Hollywood portraits to demonology, and included feral images of witches in the classic mode: riding brooms in the nude and being burned

at the stake. We can't find a copy, but she looks up Mortensen's ancient pictures on an iPhone, and notes that the women tried for being witches in the 1600s were often "just midwives who knew about herbalism and could cure people better than doctors at the time. They weren't

calling themselves witches. They were mainly women who knew these old folk ways."

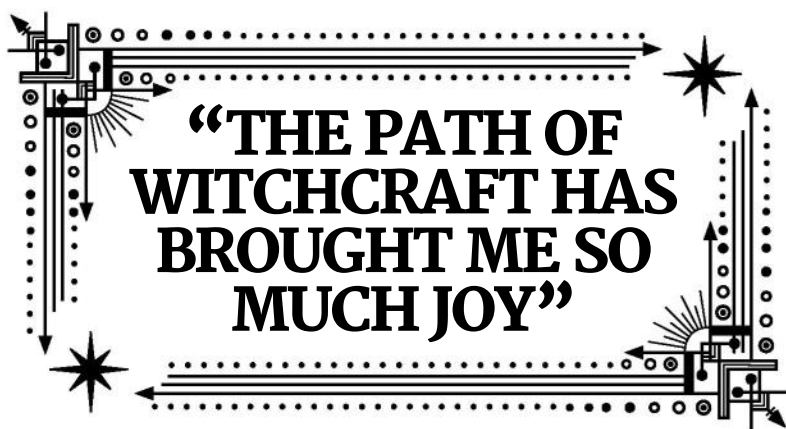
Her first experience in this world came from her maternal grandmother, who was herself just learning about herbalism and aroma therapy, and experimenting with Chelsea during visits together.

"I remember we sat cross-legged on the floor across from each other. She had all of her different flower essences in the middle, and she would put a hand on my knee to connect with me energetically," she recalls, smiling at the image. Her grandmother would run her hands over the various flower ingredients between them, and intuitively choose the blend that little Chelsea needed to reduce anxiety. "That was a good memory," she smiles.

During the 2019 tour behind her mostly acoustic *Birth Of Violence* album, she stood with her guitar inside a ceremonial circle, as if she were leading a ritual in the forest, with a crystal ball and a goblet beside her, tree branches at her feet. Just as important is what was happening offstage before each performance, as she pulled tarot cards to get herself grounded in the moment.

"I'm using my spiritual practice as a way to prepare myself, but I don't feel like my show is attempting to present some ritual or something like that," she insists. "It's still more about the music."

"The path of witchcraft has brought me so much joy and healing in my own life that I do want to share it a little bit," she goes on. "I don't want to be overbearing with it and





CHELSEA WOLFE

Out of the broom closet:
Chelsea is a proud witch

You could lose yourself for hours in these aisles...



make anyone weirded out or uncomfortable who's not into it. That's why I do it in a subtle way."

Her gothic sense of style was established in adolescence when she lived in Sacramento, Northern California.

"Even in high school, if I went to a dance, I would wear all black. My friends thought I was weird, but I'm drawn naturally to things that are a bit witchier," she explains with a laugh. "Like boots with lots of laces and things that are a little bit more flowy."

In her music videos, she is often seen in exotic natural locations that play into that image. For the videos for the new songs *Whispers In The Echo Chamber* and *Tunnel*

Lights, she travelled to Colombia to shoot high up in the Eastern Andes. On camera, she strolls through the scene in billowing layers of black, dark hair blowing in the breeze, the good witch at the centre of the storm.

"We were literally just wandering through these mountains with a crew, which was a really fun experience," she says. "It felt very *Lord Of The Rings*."

After *Birth Of Violence*, Chelsea's plan was to make a full band album, but everything was delayed by the pandemic. A European tour was cancelled, and she returned home. In the woodsy isolation of her house, she got sober. Vodka had been her social lubricant of choice for years, and when she toured things could get reckless.

"There were actually times when people would throw edibles onstage, and I would stupidly eat them – then be on

the bus at two in the morning questioning my entire life," she says, laughing. "There was just dumb shit like that that didn't need to happen after a while."

Things shifted creatively and personally as songs began to emerge for what would become *She Reaches Out To She*. The album was recorded with producer

Dave Sitek (of art-rockers TV On The Radio) at his studio in Glendale, California, in a house intriguingly close to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory – an institution co-founded by Jack Parsons, the rocket scientist and follower of Aleister Crowley.

"This album thematically is so much about transformation and rebirth," Chelsea explains. "You can still be a musician and be totally sober and it's not going to end your life.

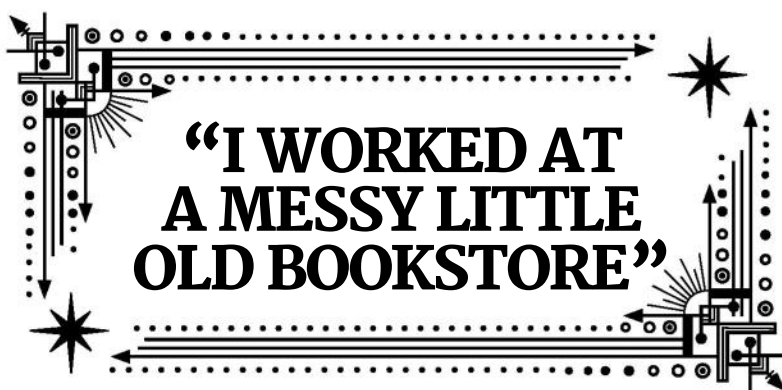
That's why I'm trying to be

more open about the things that have helped me find more peace and groundedness and healing. I'm a 40-year-old woman now. I hope that I can sort of influence younger people who are maybe thinking about the same things."

For Chelsea, it's been a busy few days in Los Angeles. Last night, she hosted a listening party for the new record that went on long into the evening, and now as the afternoon rolls onward, she feels her energy dropping. By the end of the week, she'll be back at her house in the woods, about a two-hour drive from Sacramento.

She's lived out there for years now, but she has notions of one day moving overseas.

"I think it would be really hard to leave. But I feel like at some point I'm going to need a change of scenery."



For now, you can feel her connection to the wilderness in a series of iPhone videos she's posted online, featuring her playing a few of the new songs alone, acoustically. Stripped of the album's postmodern production, the songs are raw but gorgeous, and in harmony with the nature around her.

"Where I live, the four seasons are very present, and during the pandemic, I had that time at home to really be present with each of these seasons," she explains. "When my beloved cat passed away last April, it was just at the very beginning of spring, and something about her passing made me spend a lot more time outside and paying attention to the growth and the new life. It's a real gift for me to be able to live somewhere quiet and up in the mountains. It suits my natural inclinations very well."

As a practising witch, she's connected to like-minded women near and far, but she's not part of a coven.

"I think there's a lot of solitary witches. I guess I consider myself a solitary witch, but I also have a community."

Part of that community emerges at her shows on the road.

At home, she reads regularly, focusing on the witchy and esoteric during the day, the fictional and relaxing at night. Right now she's reading Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* series. She tends to have a few books in progress at any one time.

"I like to have books as a research tool, especially when I'm writing," Chelsea says. "It's a little more interesting to just think about what subject I'm writing about and go to my bookshelf and intuitively pull what feels right, than to just go on the internet to look things up. I love having this sort of mini library."

In 2021, she added a new volume to her shelves: the lavishly illustrated history, *Witchcraft*, part of arty publisher Taschen's Library Of Esoterica, co-edited by her friend Pam Grossman, a self-described "teacher of magical practice". Chelsea contributed a short essay to the book, another step in her increasingly public practice in the larger occulture. But her interest in the language of magick and alternative forms of spirituality has been there all along.

A few years ago, she collaborated with filmmaker Virginie Khateeb on a short film set to her reading of a poem that previously lay buried beneath layers of sound in the song *Erde*. In a breathless whisper, she recites: "*I am the mother of the forest / I want to be wrapped in ivy...*" and then unfurls an evocative list of natural herbs and fauna like ingredients for some mysterious purpose, an animist through and through. "*Mandrake & Blessed Thistle/Butcher's Broom & Flame Azalea... Orris, Red Fescue/Sumac, Hemlock/Rose Hips, Striped Violet/Velvet Ash & Golden Aster.*"

"It's part of my creative process now to be a lot more intentional about how I write and creating a sacred space



Chelsea finds the book she wanted, in the strangest part of the store

for myself," she says of how her interest in the spiritual and esoteric has impacted her life, on and off the stage. "And it's taught me a lot about energy. I got even deeper into it once I got sober from alcohol. I just feel like in my mind and spirit, so much space was opened up." **H**

SHE REACHES OUT TO SHE REACHES OUT TO SHE IS OUT NOW VIA LOMA VISTA. FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE LAST BOOKSTORE, VISIT WWW.LASTBOOKSTORELA.COM. CHELSEA PLAYS MYSTIC FESTIVAL, POLAND, IN JUNE – SEE WWW.MYSTICFESTIVAL.PL

Rebel Angels

The singers, artists and occultists who inspired Chelsea Wolfe

STEVIE NICKS
Chelsea Wolfe's first glimpses of the witchy and musical came via rock icon and Fleetwood Mac vocalist Stevie Nicks, brought to life via the band's multi-platinum-selling live VHS, *The Dance*, released in August 1997. "I grew up listening to Fleetwood Mac," recalls Chelsea. "Seeing Stevie Nicks flowing around onstage with her witchy outfits was an obvious inspiration."

PRACTICAL MAGIC
The 1998 film, starring Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock, was based on a novel by Alice Hoffman that was later expanded into a series. "I recently read those books that the movie is based on and they're just so wonderful. They're so much, like, darker and deeper than the Hollywood version," she says.

THE BRONTË SISTERS
Yorkshire-born Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë were poets and novelists at a time when women were not accepted in literary circles, producing classics like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. "They chose to write against all the odds," says Chelsea. "That was so inspiring for me as a 16-year-old girl."

SYLVIA PLATH
The American poet's life was short (she died aged just 30), but she's been an incredibly important figure to generations of young women, including Chelsea. "One of my early songs, *The Widow*, was directly influenced by her poem, *The Widow*," reveals Chelsea. "Sylvia Plath was one of my first dark woman writer touchstones for sure."

MARJORIE CAMERON AND LEONORA CARRINGTON
The influence of these 20th-century surrealist painters and occultists can be seen in the cover art of Chelsea's new album, *She Reaches Out...*: "I was aware of their work as a younger person, but as I got more into witchcraft, they were prevalent in that world, and I got into them again."

GRIME MUSIC IS PUNK MUSIC

Incendiary, explosive, empowering
– Bob Vylan are the crossover band
Britain needs right now

WORDS: ZOYA RAZA-SHEIKH • PICTURES: KI PRICE



A

s a teenager, Bobby Vylan would hunker down with his PlayStation 2, fiddling with beats on *Music 2000* or ripping through high scores on *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. He was baptised by gaming soundtracks, which bombarded him with souped-up songs from

Blink-182, Green Day and System Of A Down.

Creative inspiration, however, hit closer to home when UK garage crew Musical Mob flexed their DIY grime flair with their 16-bar loop hit *Pulse X*, released in 2002 and made on the PlayStation. Suddenly, Bobby realised that art could come from anywhere.

"I had a PlayStation, so if they could make that, then I could make that too," he says. "It made me realise I had something creative inside me wanting to get out."

Today, that kid is one half of Bob Vylan, the East London duo whose scathing lyrics and sledgehammer mix of grime, hip hop and rock, and explosive live shows, have positioned them as the UK's most incendiary band. We meet the singer and guitarist in a high-ceilinged tea-room in Shoreditch, East London on a cold January afternoon. He's casually dressed in a heather-grey jumper and trousers, long dreads spilling past his shoulders, and sipping a decaf oat milk drink (he's a staunch vegan).

Bobby's bandmate and near-namesake, drummer Bobbie Vylan, is absent today, but the pair have presented an otherwise united front ever since they formed the band in 2017. Over the past seven years, they've released a string of singles, EPs and albums that have seen them roughing up the music scene while taking swings at politicians, the super-wealthy, hypocrites and racists in the process. They crashed into the UK Top 20 with their 2022 album *Bob Vylan Presents The Price Of Life* and bagged several awards along the way, including the inaugural Best Alternative Music Act category at the 2022 MOBO Awards.

"We're aware of the framing of being the first band of colour to do a lot of things," says Bobby. "I have no problem being the first, so long as we're not the last."

There was a lack of representation in the alt rock scene when Bobby was growing up, but that wasn't enough to hold him back. He first picked up a guitar aged 12, with no clear motive other than to be a musician, but it wasn't until he went to university that he met another Black guitarist. Becoming part of an alt rock band, he saw the connection between the music he was making then and the other genres of music he loved, such as grime.

"Grime music is punk music," he says of his early influences. "It has a DIY attitude at the heart of it. It's a youth-created counterculture. It was dismissed by the mainstream at first. It's all the same thing."

Bob Vylan meshed those influences together, but not everybody wanted to hear what they had to say, or how they were saying it.

"Nothing was easy," Bobby says, adding that the mainstream music industry "just didn't get it" and dismissed the idea that there was an appetite for a Black rock band.

"If they believe they're not going to listen to rock music by two Black guys talking about a Black experience, why are there so many white kids at rap concerts?" says Bobby. "If the music is good, and if it resonates with people, they'll get into it."

Instead, they decided to do things their way. They record and produce their music themselves, and all but one of the two EPs and two albums they've released so far have come out on their own label, Ghost Theatre (the exception is 2020's full-length debut, *We Live Here*, released on independent Manchester label Venn Records). The pair are putting their upcoming third album, *Humble As The Sun*, out themselves too. That DIY ethos is central to who Bob Vylan are.

"We could just sign, and we go through that machine and cross our fingers and hope to be the next big thing," says Bobby. "But, actually, what's more important for us is a fair and ethical way of releasing music. We don't want to be like, 'Give me my 20 pounds and fuck off!' We want to interact and get to know our audience."

He cites early 80s anarcho punks Crass as an influence, and not just for their self-sufficiency. "Crass independently released music on their own record label and other artists' music on their record label," he says.

"THE SUN DOES NOT DIM ITS LIGHT FOR ANYBODY AND I REFUSE TO DIM MINE"

BOBBY VYLAN



"They've been vocal on everything from feminism and female rights to animal rights, police brutality and government corruption. They've created a cult fan base that will likely live on forever and are incredibly active activists that try to make a change further than their music. That's a band that influenced me on how to be more than just music."

The full-throttle *Humble As The Sun* cranks up their grime-punk fusion. As always, Bobby pulls no punches, satirising toxic masculinity and what it means to be "a proper manly man" on *He's A Man*, and launching a scathing attack on the cost of living crisis and the inequality that drives it on *Hunger Games*. Their willingness to hold up a mirror to the failings of the UK and their refusal to shy away from confrontation has seen Bob Vylan saddled with the tag of a 'political band.' It's not something Bobby disagrees with.

"You could argue that my existence within this country as a Black man is politicised from the offset," he says.

Just as he holds up Crass as an influence on his band's DIY approach and worldview, Bobby was equally inspired by New York rapper Nas's landmark 1994 debut album, *Illmatic*.

A tale of two Vylans:
Bobbie and Bobby



"It was released in the early 90s but I found it much later," he says. "His ability as a storyteller and to describe his environment as a participator but also as an observer is something that has inspired me as a lyricist and a musician."

That storytelling is present on *Humble As The Sun*. The explosive *Dream Big* finds him singing about growing up fast, and he recalls "sipping syrup" and hiding from "the Feds" on *I'm Still Here*. They're vivid personal snapshots and life experiences that many will identify with or, hopefully, learn to understand.

"There's been a recurring theme throughout my life – that school-to-prison pipeline that people talk about," he says. "I lived various ways, making money, and I managed to go to university and get my undergrad and my Masters in Music at Goldsmiths [University in South London]. I have plans to go to university and get my PhD."

Just as Bobby wrote his own fate, so he hopes the band and their message can encourage fellow artists to have self-belief in their calling.

"The album offers a sense of self-empowerment, which a lot of artists are told not to have," he says. "They're told to be humble and to make themselves meek and appreciative of what we're given. You do a disservice to the people from our communities who are coming up

if you don't speak up about what you went through and how you've got to this position, and you're not proud and puffing out your chest about it."

For all its lyrical takedowns, *Humble As The Sun* provides a shot of optimism in the face of social and political adversity.

"I don't want people to think I've lost my mind," Bobby laughs, "but the sun does not dim its light for anybody and I refuse to dim mine."

Bob Vylan's own light shows no signs of dimming, with bigger gigs, higher festival slots, more recognition and, hopefully, less pushback on the horizon. But Bobby says they're not particularly interested in that kind of success. Instead, Bob Vylan want to cultivate change, and in the spirit of their new album, they're ready to be loud about their wins and what they want next.

"I'm doing a service the same way that anybody else is doing the service in this world," he says. "And if I feel that I have accomplished something that was set out before me – that I was told was impossible – then I will be vocal about it." **H**

HUMBLE AS THE SUN WILL BE RELEASED ON APRIL 5 VIA GHOST THEATRE. BOB VYLAN PLAY MYSTIC FESTIVAL, POLAND, IN JUNE – SEE WWW.MYSTICFESTIVAL.PL

WHILE SHE SLEEPS

SCENE STEELERS

Hospital rooms. Car wrecks. Flaming pianos.
In 2024, While She Sleeps are taking their
DIY approach to extremes – we went up
North to see what the hell's going on

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: DEREK BREMNER



WHILE SHE SLEEPS



It's 6pm in a field in South Yorkshire, and Mat Welsh – guitarist, vocalist and band manager of UK metalcore stalwarts While She Sleeps – has just set a piano on fire.

"Let's have a ritual!" he screeches, like a member of a black metal band, eyes bulging as he jumps up and down with unadulterated glee.

Bassist Aaran McKenzie sternly motions for Mat to step away from the blaze. He grabs a video camera, and addresses a male actor the band have hired for the day: "Get as close to it as you can and scream at it – really let me feel the

heartache. Really scream!"

Frontman Loz Taylor, probably the calmest person within a 20-mile radius, turns to us in the pitch black, face illuminated solely by the fire a few feet away. He smiles.

"This looks fucking mint."

He's not wrong. It's also completely terrifying.

We've travelled to Chesterfield, 15 miles south of While She Sleeps' hometown of Sheffield, to see the band make a music video for a new song called *To The Flowers*. Like everything they do in their career, they're giving it 100%. Today's flaming piano scene is part of a high-concept story involving the breakdown of a relationship, which will feature everything from cars submerged in lakes to a sodden actor walking through the streets of the Steel City. The shoot will take *two months* to complete.

When we arrive at the field, Mat is the first to turn up, in a van with the ill-fated piano in the back.

"Two months to make a music video," he cackles, as he jumps out and shakes our hand. "People might wonder why we bother. 'Who does that?' Well... we like to have complete control."

In 2016, While She Sleeps – completed by drummer Adam Savage and guitarist Sean Long (today accompanied on location by his dog, Nova) – decided to ditch their major label deal with Sony and become a fully fledged DIY act. They took on all management decisions, created their own warehouse studio complex, and formed the Sleeps Brothers record label to release their music.

It was a huge risk, but it's paid off. A UK Top 10 album for 2017's *You Are We* and a show-stealing Main Stage slot at 2021's Download Pilot are just two of the highlights that led to last year's 10,000-capacity headline show at London's Alexandra Palace. Now in their eighth year of going it alone, While She Sleeps are preparing to release their fourth album on Sleeps Brothers and sixth overall, titled *Self Hell*. It's been a satisfying journey, but certainly not easy.

"You'd get to a point where you would go, 'Oh, we need someone to do that?'" Mat says, reflecting on the hidden, endless, tedious admin of being in a band. "If you don't do your accounts, fuck, you can't put the record out. Then your fucking ship's going to crash. I definitely under-acknowledged how much management did, once upon a time. 'Where are your visas? Are you insured?' All that shit, it's not rock'n'roll at all. But it is really important if you want to still be doing this at a certain level."

Mat Welsh is unquestionably the most openly excitable member of While She Sleeps. As the rest of his band and a few local helpers arrive in the field, he cajoles everyone into dragging the piano, that he sourced, out of the back of the van, and then sets it up meticulously and eagerly douses it in petrol. In a couple of days, he'll be cutting the roof off a car and filling it full of water for another scene. You can't imagine Gene Simmons doing that.

He's clearly a hands-on kind of guy, telling us how he designed the front cover of *Self Hell* by creating a glass logo



Sofa, so good. Perfectionists at work, and loving it

of the band, shattering it, and then painstakingly rearranging the pieces and photographing them. When someone pointed out to him that it could have been done quicker and cheaper with computer images and no one would have known, his response is that, "I'd have known. You don't win a Heavy Music Award for all the shit people don't see [Sleeps won the Innovation category in 2022], but it would bother me, it would eat away at me."

The rest of Sleeps are stepping up their efforts, too. For the first time, every member has a crew role on this music video – alongside Mat as production manager, Loz is the director/stylist, Aaran is director of photography, Sean is the director and Adam is the first assistant director. The band have just come from a derelict house without heating, where they've been shooting scenes featuring their protagonist in happier times.

"It was colder there than it was out here!" Mat laughs.

The *To The Flowers* video is not only a testament to the band's dedication, it's a testament to the local community's emotional investment in them, and to the power of asking for help. Mat sounds incredulous as he explains that Doncaster council gave them permission to drag an actor from a lake, while Doncaster hospital lent them a room to film in.

"All the nurses and the staff were coming in to see if we were alright and if we needed anything," smiles Mat. "I think it was exciting for them. But we've found that everywhere, people are really supportive. I think we've got a reputation locally as having done something pretty awesome with our band, and people are kind of willing us on to do well. There's actually a great community spirit up here."

As the rest of the band amble over to say hello, we remark to Loz that it's a lot of effort to put into making a video. Couldn't they have mimed playing the song in an empty warehouse? Or got someone else to shoot it?

"When you're getting someone else to make your music videos for you, they can end up not being an honest representation of what you wanted them to feel like and look like," replies the chilled Loz, who's constantly smiley and unusually softly spoken for a man who screams his guts up for a living. "So I think the reason why we're all so involved in every little aspect is because we all give so much of a shit about the art that we make."

In a mirroring of their teamwork on this video, Loz will later describe *Self Hell* as the record While She Sleeps

**“WE USED TO COME
OFFSTAGE FEELING
A STONE LIGHTER
FOR EXPELLING
NEGATIVE ENERGY”**

LOZ TAYLOR

Loz Taylor: very cool, very
calm and very collected



WHILE SHE SLEEPS

While She Sleeps (left to right):
Aaran McKenzie, Loz Taylor, Adam
Savage, Mat Welsh, Sean Long





Epic! The band sacrifice a piano in the name of art

“HER HUSBAND LOVED THE PIANO”

MAT WELSH

have “most trusted” each other on, resulting in the most collaborative songs of their career. *Self Hell* still sounds like *While She Sleeps*, but listen to it after spending a day in their company, and you can hear each member’s personality come through. Mat will happily recommend a variety of ambient, electro DJs he’s currently discovering; Loz confesses to being a “massive emo kid”, while also speaking about his love for vocalists such as The Verve’s Richard Ashcroft and The Stone Roses’ Ian Brown; Sean will have an enthusiastic conversation about discovering Radiohead’s landmark *Kid A* album; all of them still talk fervently about the early 2000s metalcore of *Darkest Hour*, *Converge* and *Every Time I Die*.

Lyricaly, *Self Hell* alludes to periods of mental health difficulties for the bandmembers. Thankfully, Loz explains that it’s more of a reflection of former problems than current ones.

“A lot of this record has been inspired by not everyone in the band having the best time,” he delicately puts it. “*Self Hell* being the title might suggest that. The record before this one [2021’s *Sleeps Society*], we were all a mess. People in the band were going through mental break-ups and we’re still talking about things that have impacted us. But the actual process was probably one of my clearer headspaces to talk about bad times.”

So, was *Self Hell* fun to make?

“Yeah, this process has been nice actually,” Loz nods. “We’ve been through actual therapy, but I think some of the therapy came from us playing live. We just used to

Hmmm, was this covered in *The Highway Code* book?



Looks nippy out there, lads





No time for napping!
There's work to be done!

“I FEEL LIKE SO FEW BANDS REALLY CARE ABOUT VIDEOS ANYMORE”

AARAN McKENZIE

go completely batshit, and let it all out and bleed and sweat, and then come off and feel a stone lighter for expelling all that negative energy.”

While we’ve been chatting to Loz, Aaran – bassist and director of photography – has taken the lead, buzzing around with hyper-focused intensity, camera in hand. He shoots the piano from afar, he cajoles the actor to scream, to drop to his knees, to angrily splash a jerry can full of petrol over the piano. If there’s one person here who seems to be driving things, it’s Aaran. It’s understandable, given he’s got serious designs on making a full-blown movie.

“I had always made little videos and social media things for us from the start,” he explains. “I started realising that I had a flair

“I CALL IT BRIT-MOSH!”

While She Sleeps have always embraced outside influences – here are the guest artists they picked for sixth album *Self Hell*

SONG: NO FEELING IS FINAL

Guest: Aether

Mat: “Aether is a Canadian artist who does modular synth stuff. You can almost give him a set of notes, and then he can put it through all his mental analogue, modular stuff and you can’t do anything twice on it. The next time you put it back in, something will happen differently. Sean really wanted that as a palate-cleanser. It’s natural, it’s freeform.”

SONG: DOPESICK

Guest: Fin Power, Stone

Mat: “Stone are sick, I just stumbled across Fin and the record has this sort of Britpop influence.”

Loz: “I call it Brit-mosh.”

Mat: “Yeah, that should be the tag! It’s got a weird undertone of all the stuff we’ve been into for so long – the Manchester thing, Ian Brown, The Verve. They’ve all got really distorted voices, which is what I love about that kind of music.”

SONG: DOWN

Guest: Alex Taylor, Malevolence

Mat: “He just hangs round the studio – a lot of local musicians and mates come down here now. So, we’ve known him for ages. It’s really cool to see how Malevolence are getting on, and it made sense to have him on the record. We’re really proud of our scene, obviously, so we want to show that.”

for it. I got a bit of work from other sources – you get a bit more confident every time. Now I’ve written a feature, getting that made is the next challenge for me. But doing stuff like this is so important. I feel like so few bands really care about videos anymore, but for us, everything has to be right.”

He then goes back to telling the actor to smash his frozen, gloveless hands down on the piano’s keys, like a Yorkshire, metalcore Stanley Kubrick.

As the sun begins to set, it’s finally time to light up the piano. This is where Mat goes feral. Aaran grabs his camera, knowing there’s only a finite amount of time to shoot the blazing structure, and busily spins round it, capturing every angle. The rest of us stand transfixed as the instrument turns to ashes. Mat, having calmed down now, tells us how he procured it.

“It’s quite a sad story, actually,” he says.

“I found it from this old lady locally. Her husband had just passed away and he loved the piano. She was so nice and so happy to have someone who wanted it as much as we did.”

He pauses.

“I didn’t tell her we were going to do *this* to it. But I’m trying to tell myself that we’re taking it and making something beautiful and meaningful with it. Immortalising it, in a way.”

If While She Sleeps are to be immortalised, it will be on their terms and their terms alone. **H**

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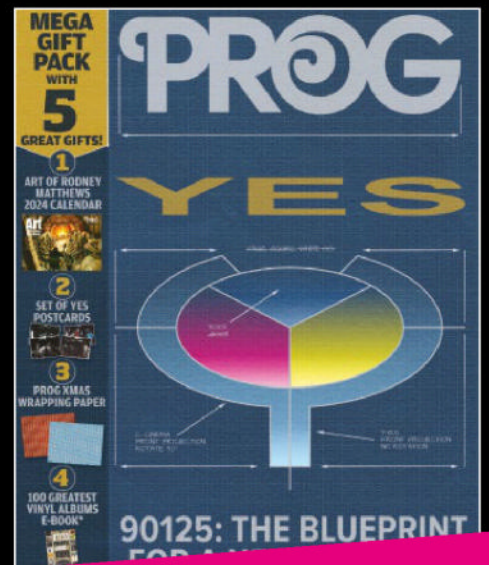
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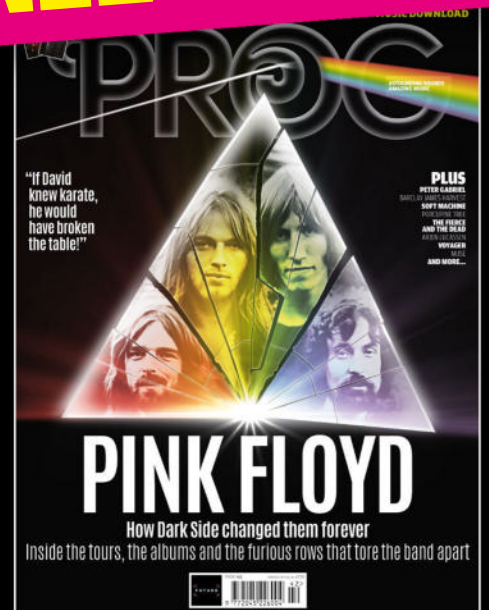
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The cover features a large portrait of Steve Hackett, who has long dark hair and is wearing a red jacket over a black shirt. He is holding a small black cat against his chest. The background is a surreal landscape with a full moon, clouds, a small white boat, a whale's tail emerging from the water, and a striped circus tent on a beach at night. In the top left corner, there are several small album covers. At the bottom, the title "PROG" is written in large, bold, white letters. Below it, the name "STEVE HACKETT" is written in large, bold, red letters. To the right of the name, there is a red circular badge with white text that reads "READERS' POLL RESULTS STEVE WAS TOP OF YOUR FAVORITE IN JULY 2017". On the far right, there is a barcode and some text including "CUTTER", "DISTRIBUTION", and "NOVEMBER 2017". At the very bottom, there is a quote from Hackett: "I've tried to make a film for the ear..." followed by the title of his album, "VOYAGE OF THE ANACREONTE".



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THE REVIEWS

96

BRING ME THE HORIZON

Sheffield's chart-storming metal futurists blaze through Manchester

84

JUDAS PRIEST

The metal gods return triumphant

84 ALBUM REVIEWS

86 WHILE SHE SLEEPS

87 BLIND CHANNEL

90 DRAGONFORCE

91 GOST

92 MINISTRY

93 NEW YEARS DAY

96 LIVE REVIEWS

99 BURY TOMORROW

100 SOUTH OF SALEM

101 METAL ALLEGIANCE

102 MALEVOLENCE

103 PERIPHERY

EDITED BY: JONATHAN SELZER • PICTURE: JONTI WILD

Judas Priest: still in evergreen form



JUDAS PRIEST

Invincible Shield

COLUMBIA UK

Birmingham's Metal Gods storm back into the realms of the unassailable



AT ITS HEART, Judas Priest's story has always been one of triumph. Black Sabbath may have invoked the spirit of heavy metal with an air of post-war gloom, but it was Priest that gave the genre a spine. Rob Halford's defiant utterances that 'United we never shall fall' and 'You think I'll let it go you're mad... you've got another thing comin'' became the calls to arms for every beaten-down

THIS MAY BE THE MOST TRIUMPHANT RECORD OF PRIEST'S CAREER

underdog to rise up and seize success on their own terms. And goddamn if they haven't done it again on *Invincible Shield*.

Fifty years on from their tentative first steps with *Rocka Rolla* and more than two decades since Halford rejoined the band and ushered in a glorious second age – Nostradamus aside – Priest have produced what may well be the most defiantly, unrelentingly triumphant

record of their career. In 2018, *Firepower* laid down a gauntlet for all of Priest's fellow metal elder statesmen in terms of vigour and

quality, producers Tom Allom and Andy Sneap giving the band a modern production and sheen that helped the record feel fresh and undeniably vital. Seeing that nobody else has picked up said gauntlet, Priest have followed it with an all-out cavalry charge.

Galloping out the gates, *Panic Attack*, *The Serpent And The King* and the title track are what happens when Priest get meat between their teeth, taking the rampaging energy of *Firepower* highlight *Lightning Strike* and turning it into a constant barrage. There's a fire-and-brimstone delivery to Halford's vocal that has popped up less frequently since 2005's comeback, *Angel Of Retribution*. It's not quite the ear-splitting banshee wails



ABORTED *Vault Of Horrors*

NUCLEAR BLAST

Belgian death metal aficionados settle in for a night of video nasties

While 2021's *ManiaCult* saw these Belgians fleshing out their technical death metal with swathes of atmosphere and pomp, this celebration of some of horror cinema's most beloved and notorious films finds them heading back into the gutter. The symphonic flourishes on *Condemned To Rot*, *Hellbound* and *The Shape Of Hate* still ensure a sense of grandeur, but the emphasis on chuggy breakdowns makes *Vault Of Horrors* a grubbier, more punishing listen. The guest list is fuller than ever, with every track featuring members of Archspire, Despised Icon and more. Played with wanton abandon, the macabre delight creates a fitting finale for departing bassist Stefano Franceschini.

■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Shadow Of Intent, Cattle Decapitation, Ingested

ADAM BRENNAN



BLAZE BAYLEY *Circle Of Stone*

BLAZE BAYLEY RECORDING

Trad metal heroism from the ultimate survivor

Blaze Bayley has always been made of the sternest of stuff. *Circle Of Stone* was completed just before the former Maiden frontman was felled by a heart attack, but he still sounds like a steel-plated superhero throughout this vital and strident return. Those who have followed Blaze's

of *Painkiller* or *Exciter*, but akin to those genre-defining moments, striding with the assuredness that comes with being recognised as the Metal God.

Andy Sneap again wrings absolute gold from guitarists Richie Faulkner and Glenn Tipton. Riffs go from Harley-Davidson chugs to sublime, soaring melodies on the likes of *Devil In Disguise* and *Gates Of Hell*, befitting a band used to conquering crowds by their thousands. Meanwhile, *As God Is My Witness* taps into the furious energy that saw Priest contribute to the DNA of thrash and extreme metal. For all the bluster, the band also find space to let their melodious side shine; *Crown Of Horns* is a classic Priest power ballad with a chorus that begs for huge sing-alongs. It's a brief respite, however. *Trial By Fire* brings forth a Priest performance worthy

of a pantheon unto itself, while *Sons Of Thunder* out-Vikings Amon Amarth as it pillages with glee.

Between Glenn's live retirement and Richie's well-publicised medical emergency onstage in 2021, it's not surprising that discussion of Priest's retirement has crept back into the conversation in recent years. But with *Invincible Shield*, they have once again beaten the odds, and by the time the curtain falls on *Giants In The Sky* – a tribute to Dio and Lemmy – there can be no denying it: Judas Priest have produced an album worthy of their own legendary status, still showing the rest of the world how it's done. Bostin'.

■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Metallica, Sabaton, Amon Amarth

RICH HOBSON

solo endeavours over the last 24 years will know what to expect. This is a fervently traditional, melodic metal album, with our hero's ageless bellow as a mesmerising focal point. *Mind Reader* and *Ghost In The Bottle* are as effortlessly anthemic as anything he has recorded in years, while the Celtic clangour of the title track is rousing enough to incite a bloody uprising. He's back, and he's still more metal than you.

■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Saxon, Iron Maiden, Tailgunner

DOM LAWSON



BLANKET *Ceremonia*

CHURCH ROAD

Windswept, shoegaze-infused wonders from the Blackpool coasts

Blanket chose their moniker well. OK, the Blackpool quartet aren't soft or cuddly, but their multi-faceted sound is all encompassing and cathartic – a heavy cloak of tones, colours, texture and atmosphere that completely envelopes. Following the band's excellent, occasionally bleak 2021 album, *Modern Escapism*, this third record feels warmer, heavier and louder, and digs deeper into their Britpop and shoegaze influences. As such, these 10 tracks feel like a storm building on the horizon. The wistful and often triumphant choruses of opener *Nuclear Boy Scout*, *Kaleidoscope* and *Sea Of Bliss (Reprise)* are like lighthouses at the centre of a howling vortex, as guitars and drums thunder and crash, before the winds drop into a moment of serenity. Violent and beautiful.

■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Loathe, Ride, Swervedriver

DANNII LEIVERS

While She Sleeps have been waiting in the wings for true A-list status



WHILE SHE SLEEPS

Self Hell

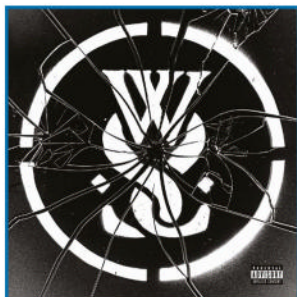
SLEEPS BROTHERS

Sheffield's slow-burn metalcore stars reinvigorate rather than revolutionise

IF TIMING TRULY is everything, then While She Sleeps could be forgiven for feeling hard done by. Their ascension through British metalcore's ranks since their 2006 inception has been one of slow and incremental gains, from the country's spit'n'sawdust village halls all the way, in 2023, to London's Alexandra Palace. That it's come in a golden age of British metalcore, however, has always left a feeling that Sleeps were forever playing bridesmaid to their friends in the indomitable Bring Me The Horizon and Architects. Little wonder that it has left frontman Loz Taylor talking up feelings of imposter syndrome within their ranks.

The build-up to *Self Hell*, the quintet's sixth full-length, has also seen the frontman and his comrades keen to announce the experimentation and progression to be found in its 12 tracks. This perhaps further hints at the feeling of breath on the back of their necks, the genre's young innovators such as Bad Omens and Spiritbox not so much creeping up in the rearview mirror as ripping up the road entirely. 'Adapt or die' would

be too strong a sentiment for a band that continues to take forward, if not sometimes circuitous, strides, but While She Sleeps won't be alone in feeling the sense of 'adapt to thrive' in the current heavy music landscape.



It is in that revolutionary promise alone that *Self Hell* falls short of expectations. This is not, whatever you may have come to anticipate, While She Sleeps 2.0. True to the form of a band who have never shied from tinkering under the hood, *Self Hell* deals in assured reinvigoration,

not radical reinvention.

Prominent synths and electronics are introduced out of the gate on the first track proper, *Leave Me Alone*, which also sees the band's multi-pronged vocal assault experiment in rapped and spoken styles far beyond Loz Taylor's trademark screams. *Rainbows* and the album's title track take this baton and run with it further still. Meanwhile, the brooding, cinematic *No Feeling Is Final* and the drum'n'bass-leaning skit *Out Of The Blue* serve as a pair of almost entirely instrumental interludes.

At their best, such explorations bring a new palette and energy to *Self Hell*; when they land shy of their mark, however, such as on the ballad-of-sorts *To The Flowers* and *Radical Hatred / Radical Love*, there is a case for putting Sleeps in the dock on charges of simply trying too hard to force differentiation. *Self Hell*'s strongest moments remain when the band lock in to spaces they have long mastered, and ride on the oft-underappreciated strength of Mat Welsh and Sean Long's fretwork – see the anthemic *Down*, featuring a stellar turn from Alex Taylor of Malevolence.

Sonically and – in its authentic, if not original positive mental health advocacy – thematically, *Self Hell* delivers as a record and statement of our unstable, head-spinning times. It's a levelling up of the Sleeps blueprint, and a work that will undoubtedly see them make similar strides in the live arena, where the album's scope of ambition will surely come further to life. With that in mind, nearly 20 years in, While She Sleeps may well have nailed the timing of their run at metal's highest echelons to perfection.

FOR FANS OF: Bring Me The Horizon, Bad Omens, Linkin Park

SAM COARE



Orchards Of A Futile Heaven

Electro madness meets heavy music's weirdest band

Serial collaborators and noisy bastards The Body have found another kindred spirit with whom to destroy boundaries. Berlin maverick Dis Fig's music sounds like machines eating themselves, which makes her the perfect counterpoint to Chip King and Lee Buford's ongoing campaign to subvert metal into something far more terrifying. *Orchards Of A Futile Heaven* is no all-out act of sonic terrorism; instead, this meeting of minds has led to shape-shifting clouds of disintegrating noise, laced with Dis Fig's achingly human vocals and monstrous, industrial beats that fade in and out erratically, like monsters in a fever dream. It's not without melodic moments, with the title track and *Eternal Hours* nodding towards a perverse strain of glitched-out shoegaze. Conversely, the epic *Coils Of Kaa* is utterly mad and profoundly moving.

FOR FANS OF: *Gnaw Their Tongues*, *Boris*, *Low*

DOM LAWSON



Fall

CENTURY MEDIA

Norway's windswept prog metal veterans take an epic tumble

When it comes to making
albums that evoke
grandiose, frostbitten
landscapes, and the swirling

spectres lurking within, Borknagar have got form. Øystein G. Brun's crew have never lost their desire to set sail for alien territory and *Fall*, the follow-up to 2019's certifiably righteous *True North*, might be the most ambitious album of their 30-year career. From the frostbitten fury that erupts at the start of *Summits* to the bewildering twists and turns of cataclysmic closer *Northward*, every song is an irresistible banquet of elegant melody and grand, progressive gesture. Ranging from soporific, Moog-driven psychedelia to some of the most vicious black metal they've unleashed in years, Borknagar are audibly enjoying themselves here. On the lavish sprawl of *Stars Ablaze* and moonlit rabble-rouser *Nordic Anthem*, they sound nothing less than transcendent.

■■■■■ ■■ ■■

FOR FANS OF: Enslaved,
Ihsahn, Finsterforst

DOM LAWSON



There Is A Problem

On Earth

ARISING EMPIRE

German metalcore hopefuls seek out an atmospheric USP

Standing out from the metalcore pack while walking the same well-trodden path as Parkway Drive and The Ghost Inside was a tough ask for Defocus. Their 2021 debut was pervasively heavy, but revelatory it was not. Hearing them dive headfirst into more atmospheric waters on this follow-up, however, makes for a newly immersive proposition. The glass-gargling vocals and pit-inducing breakdowns hang tough – ...*To Not Feel Anything* is a bonafide lung-burster. But in *Biased, Crooked Mind* and *Hybrid*

Anthem, the quartet have succeeded in adding a new dimension to their big riffs-meets-big choruses MO, as pulsating electronica meets distorted soundbites and an enticing slew of ambient soundscapes. This new depth should keep the band afloat in a sea of also-rans.

10 of 10

FOR FANS OF: Parkway Drive, The Ghost Inside, Architects

SOPHIE MAUGHAN



DEVASTATOR

Conjurers Of Cruelty

LISTENABLE
Venomous creeds and balls-out blasphemy from the Derby depths

Ugly, fetid and dark: Devastator's uproarious take on blackened thrash is perfect in every way. Four years on from their widely hailed *Baptised In Blasphemy*, Derby's finest are clearly enjoying a rush of confidence. Bigger, harder and more fervently unholy than the debut, *Conjurers Of Cruelty* does conjure something spectacular from the grubbiest of ingredients. There are plenty of bands peddling similar wares, but Devastator have the muscle and the authority to transcend the usual DIY clatterings. Songs like *Black Witchery* and *Ritual Abuse (Evil Never Dies)* rip and slash like old-school Venom, while the treacly discord of *Deathspell Defloration* is punctuated with bursts of hell-for-leather *frash* that are so obnoxious and ignorant that smashing your living room up with a clawhammer may be the only plausible option. Devastator are sadistic bullies with riffs to burn.

FOR FANS OF: *Venom*, *Sodom*, *Bonehunter*

DOM LAWSON



Exit Emotions

CENTURY MEDIA

Finland's nu metal revivalists seek the route one approach to stardom

EUROVISION IS A bit of a gamble. Sure, there's the small matter of performing on one of the world's biggest stages or turbocharging your career (Måneskin anyone?). On the flipside, you might end up with a humiliating 'nil point'. For Blind Channel, though, that risk has paid off. The Finnish band performed in 2021 with their single, *Darkside*, and have since topped the charts in Europe and made their Down

With Eurovision, they also gave the nu metal revival it's most mainstream moment yet. While we've seen a wave of new bands, from Wargasm to Loathe and, more recently, Code Orange, put their creative stamp on the genre's chug and swagger, Blind Channel's own take is slick, polished and laser-focused on nu metal's most basic instinct: fun. Blind Channel call themselves "the Backstreet Boys of the metal scene", and, much like their 2022 breakthrough, *Lifestyles Of The Sick & Dangerous*, fifth album *Exit Emotions* revolves around the kind of choruses that seep into your brain after one listen.

Opener *Where's The Exit* is saturated in glossy, high-end production, with a central refrain that recalls Asking Alexandria's *Alone In A Room*. *Deadzone* and *Wolves In California* work similarly by osmosis: big, dumb and festival-ready. The influence of Amo-era Bring Me The Horizon looms large over *Keeping It Surreal* and *Red Tail Lights*, although, lacking that innovative edge that has kept BMTH relentlessly ahead of the pack, both tracks feel flat and generic.

What Blind Channel do is simplistic, no doubt too simplistic for some to swallow, but when their formula works, they tap into the anthemia and energy that's made nu metal such an enduring force. Love them or dismiss them, *Exit Emotions* will only propel them towards the arenas calling their name.

FOR FANS OF: Linkin Park, Bring Me The Horizon, Papa Roach

DANNII LEIVERS



Brat are taking 'bimbocore' through the looking glass



BRAT Social Grace

PROSTHETIC

'Barbiegrind' newcomers need to think beyond the pink

WELCOME TO THE yassification of metal. From Scene Queen's provocative bimbocore to the nu metallic girly pop of Rain Paris, there's currently a crop of up'n'comers trading heavy music's black for pink, its machismo for sexual liberation. Brat claim a place in this movement – but whether their 'barbiegrind' earns them a seat at the table remains to be seen.

At first glance, the New Orleans deathgrind darlings look like they'd fit right in. Promo pics show the quartet, led by singer Liz Selfish, glaring in front of neon mansions and enjoying a spot of tea in a rose garden. They sell t-shirts referencing *Mean Girls* (guess what colour they are) and have previously sampled Britney Spears. So far, so fetch. However, while the names leading this next generation frequently thread that vibrant femininity into their music, *Social Grace* doesn't. Pull away the shots of the band and the brightly coloured logo on the cover, and what's left is 10 songs of no-frills deathgrind.

Admittedly, as a no-frills deathgrind album, this debut is a sturdy one. Opener

Ego Death's braking from lightspeed force to groovy riffing hammers back to *Harmony Corruption*–era Napalm Death. Then *Hesitation Wound* barrages with chords and pinch harmonics, before

Rope Drag's rumbling tremolo feels worthy of a place on any Tampa death metal record. Beatdowns and roars abound throughout these 10 tracks, each with the potential to incite a hardy basement mosh.

The question just remains of Brat's intentions with all this.

Is it a cynical leap onto the femme-metal bandwagon, or rather a legitimate attempt to join a wave broadening heavy music's audience and messaging? If it's the latter, just playing tried'n'true deathgrind while picking out a pink wardrobe likely won't be enough. The band need to gain a bit more personality if they're going to get on the same hot (pink) ticket as the likes of Scene Queen and Sophie Powers.

FOR FANS OF: Napalm Death, Misery Index, Escuela Grind

MATT MILLS



EXHORDER Defectum Omnium NUCLEAR BLAST

Nineties groove-thrashers continue down the comeback trail

2019's *Mourn The Southern Skies* was an extraordinary comeback from a band who fluffed their shot at metal's big time and imploded back in 1994. There's been more upheaval since, with riff-meister and chief composer Vinnie LaBella leaving and troubled ex-Cannibal Corpse guitarist Pat O'Brien coming in. Despite the changes, *Defectum Omnium* is far more diverse than you might expect from a band often dismissed as sub-Pantera groove metal. Beyond the chunky grooves and thrash aggression, the punk and hardcore quotient is raised, murky doom waters are waded into and arresting vocals and musical twists are thrown in. The title translates to 'failure of all', but *Defectum Omnium* succeeds on its own gnarly terms.

FOR FANS OF: Pantera, Prong, Vision Of Disorder

PAUL TRAVERS



GEN AND THE DEGENERATES Anti-Fun Propaganda MARSHALL

Accessible UK punk with a hard, satirical edge

Anti-Fun Propaganda nods briefly to NYC art-punk, its title track reminiscent of Patti Smith Band's *Because The Night*, with a hint of Goo-era Sonic Youth and fuzz-drenched guitars. But overall, the Liverpool band's sound is more akin

to a fiery Lambrini Girls-themed disco than discordance. Celebratory nods to queerness on tub-thumper *Girls!* sit alongside pop-centric, arse-shaking cuts like *Famous* and *Big Hit Single*. Beneath the anthemic sheen lies satire, scathing exhortations aplenty on celebrity culture, and sociopolitical discourse. Not to mention a startling exploration of humanity in emotional closer *Jude's Song*. Loud, proud and defiant, this streetwise debut is the antithesis of its title.

■■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Witch Fever, Elastica, Lambrini Girls

SOPHIE MAUGHAN



GVLLow Twin Flames SUMERIAN

Ghostemane collaborator dives further into the world of darkwave

This Californian artist, who started out as a punk drummer before producing trap metal and beats for Ghostemane and Lil Peep's rap collective, Schemaposse, has been making glossy, 80s-inspired, nu wave goth since his 2018 solo debut, *Waste Away*. On this third album he's made a classic sound his own, merging vampiric tones with breezy SoCal punk. After *Intro / Mourning* kicks thing off with ghouls and a funeral organ, *It's So Cold* and *Leave Me Alone* delight in glistening, sequined synths. Meanwhile, *Pray To God* and *Die By Your Hand* come across like Blink-182 starting a mosh and a gang chant in the most shadowy corner of the club. *Twin Flames* is a darkly euphoric experience.

■■■■■■■■■■■

FOR FANS OF: Sisters Of Mercy, Kenny Hoopla, Bauhaus

DANNII LEIVERS



HAND OF KALLIACH

Corryvreckan
PROSTHETIC

Enrapturing Scottish duo find new riches in the folk metal seam

On their latest campaign, this Edinburgh husband-and-wife duo unleash an enthralling fusion of melodic death metal and Scottish folk – a tempestuous sonic whirlpool as captivating as the very real one after which the album is named. Tracks like *Fell Reigns* and *Cirein-cròin* showcase soaring melodies and punishing, high-velocity tempos that imbue the tracks with cinematic grandiosity. Closer *Of Twilight And The Pyre* dials back the intensity, opting instead for a glistening, pop-flavoured intro that, in its eerie calm, magnifies the savage intensity of what came before – a masterstroke in controlled chaos. Blending old folk styles into extreme metal is nothing new, but rarely is it executed with such stirring emotional impact.

FOR FANS OF: *Trees Of Eternity, Insomnium, Myrkur*

JOE DALY



HIJSS

Stuck On Common Ground
HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Trippy Italian genre-hoppers get into the groove

Genre-splicing northern Italian trio Hijss draw on psych, noise rock, punk and more to create music they call 'cosmic grunge'. Led by singer/guitarist Lois Lane, whose vocals call to

mind a mix of Monster Magnet's Dave Wyndorf and Mudhoney's Mark Arm, their polish-free debut LP showcases their strength as a primal, powerful live band, especially on the mean and moody, organ-spiced space rocker *Tilt Mode* and fuzz-laden stomper *Headless Blues*. At their best when they're blasting out barbed Hot Snakes-esque riffs, the likes of the post-punk/Krautrock mash-up *1234me* and percussive, 90s alt rock-indebted *Blow Out* are big moments that will sound huge in a sweaty club. These musical magpies are off to a flying start with this tasty, jam-based album, and it really will reward with repeat plays.

FOR FANS OF: *Stoner, Hot Snakes, Sonic Youth*
EDWIN McFEE



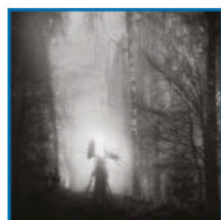
ISENORDAL
Requiem For Eirène
PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

Shape-shifting Seattleites go low in search of the heavy motherlode

What's the real definition of 'heavy'? Loud guitars? Low tuning? Or is it something more elusive, something akin to a specific emotion or feel, no matter how it is conveyed? Finding out its most resonant definition has been an ongoing quest for Seattle's Isenordal, resulting in multiple metamorphoses over the last decade or so. After their black metal debut, they took a neo-folk left-turn on 2018's *Spectral Embrace* before more or less switching to funeral doom here. Admittedly, it's a folk-tinged version of it, with extended song structures – the opening track alone is 15 minutes

long – an exuberant drummer and sudden outbursts of blackened violence. The result is bold and delicate yet also a tad overblown, and missing a proper musical director to trim the fat. Don't let that hinder your ambition, guys!

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
OLIVIER BADIN



ITERUM NATA
From The Infinite Light
NORDVIS PRODUKTION

Death, darkness and too much drama from The Abbey frontman

Under Jesse Heikkinen's (The Abbey, ex-Hexvessel) searching vision, Iterum Nata's latest rockets through a vast cosmos where genres collide like asteroids – all built around the concept of the origins of darkness and death. Opener *Overture Limitless Light* plunges into an enthralling fusion of chilling atmospherics and ethereal chants, painting a portrait of the human psyche in full revolt. As the journey unwinds, the listener is hurled into a labyrinth of shifting soundscapes, moving between the dusty balladry of *The Drifter*, *This Gleaming Eternity's* blackened prog and neo-folk on *The Crown Of All*. From *The Infinite Light* delivers some truly stirring crescendos, weaving an intricate sonic tapestry that occasionally thrills the soul. Yet the plaintive, overly dramatic vocals tend to distract from the album's otherwise gripping moments, stalling the journey rather than allowing the music's innate momentum to build.

FOR FANS OF: *Hexvessel, Blood And Sun, Lee Hazlewood*

JOE DALY

SMALL MERCIES

Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'

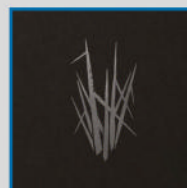


ASHEN REACH
The Fear

SELF-RELEASED

Straddling a multitude of influences and subgenres, each of the songs on the Merseyside crew's new five-track EP takes on its own flavour. *The Dark's* elasticated riffs and purposeful hook provides the standout.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
ADAM BRENNAN



GUILTLESS
Thorns

NEUROT RECORDINGS

This debut EP, featuring members of A Storm of Light and Intronaut, is a four-track, 24-minute exercise in doom-laden despair and tribalistic drumming that shows plenty of potential for their forthcoming album debut.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
REMFREY DEDMAN

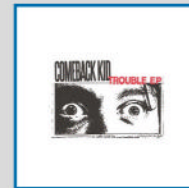


PUTERAEMON
Quindecennial Horror

EMANZIPATION PRODUCTIONS

In 2008 Puteraeon was once a solo operation for ex-Taetere guitarist Jonas Lindblood to go back to his Swedeth roots. This EP of re-recorded versions of early material is a fun, HM-2-fuelled between-albums stopgap.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
OLIVIER BADIN

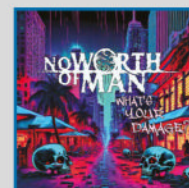


COMEBACK KID
Trouble

SHARPSTONE

Two guitarists battling for dominance, stampeding drums and tongue-in-cheek pessimism? That's Comeback Kid, alright. This gloriously two-step-dizzy EP fuses raucous thrash, buoyant punk rock and ferocious melodic hardcore.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
EMILY SWINGLE



NO WORTH OF MAN
What's Your Damage

SELF-RELEASED

This Hampshire trio's second EP is a catchy celebration of metal throughout the ages. Its hefty riffs, groove-soaked thunder and progressive licks would make both Lamb Of God and Dream Theater proud.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
SOPHIE MAUGHAN



STELLAR REMAINS
Wasteland

GUTTER PRINCE CABAL

Dan Elkin describes his solo project as 'sci-fi metal' – most likely because 'post-noise/sludge/tech-death' is too wordy. He smashes subgenres on his debut EP, each song a wild display of technical prowess and primal groove.

FOR FANS OF: *Agalloch, Opeth, Amber Asylum*
MATT MILLS



Dragonforce: power metal's rogue mob

DRAGONFORCE

Warp Speed Warriors

NAPALM

The kings of console-wrecking power metal up the cholesterol count

VIDEOGAMES HAVE BEEN good to Dragonforce. There was always a hint of malfunctioning Nintendo about the UK superstars' ultra-hyper power metal rampage, and they've been a reliable soundtrack presence since their appearance on *Guitar Hero III* made them a household name. Previous songs referenced *Skyrim*, *Castlevania* and *Starcraft*, and this ninth album gives us *Power Of The Triforce*, tackling *The Legend Of Zelda* head-on with fearless conviction. It also perfects a song style that Dragonforce have struggled to nail in the past: a concise, unfussy, midtempo nugget of earnest, melodic pop-metal in the Stratovarius vein. It's the only song of its kind here, on an album that continually zigzags between euphoric high-speed metal epics and ludicrous 80s stylistic mash-ups.

Semi-sophisti-pop ballad *Kingdom Of Steel*, despite its metal-as-fuck title, sounds like it's trying to seduce a roadie into letting it backstage at a Prefab Sprout concert, while disco metal abomination *Doomsday Party* – a brave/foolhardy choice of advance cut – is

more meme than song, with its bouncy boyband chorus and over-eager hexagonal e-drum fills. It vies with *Space Marine Corp* for the band's goofiest ever tune, the latter song's tepid chugging and ungainly gang vox inducing cringes even before the mid-section's comedy marching chant begins. For any with the deluxe edition, there's even a Taylor Swift cover to contend with.

Even so, these flamboyantly wacky avalanches of overripe gorgonzola are delivered with the band's trademark OTT exuberance and virtuosic flair. Each note is crammed with enough charismatic joie de vivre to put your fist in the air, even if the other fist is in your mouth. Besides, the four or five highest-velocity mega-bangers – especially *Burning Heart*, *The Killer Queen* and *Pixel Prison* – more than confirm this wayward quintet's continual pushing of envelopes and mastery of craft.

FOR FANS OF: Sonata Arctica, Twilight Force, Gloryhammer

CHRIS CHANTLER



KILL THE LIGHTS

Death Melodies

FEARLESS

Bullet and Still Remains members put their pedals to the metal

Kill The Lights have mustered up a triumphant twist on a classic sound. Boasting talents from Throw The Fight, Still Remains, Threat Signal and Bullet For My Valentine, the quintet bring a plethora of alt metal, post-hardcore and metalcore textures to the table – and the result is a juggernaut of revitalised heavy metal. *Death Melodies* keeps you on your toes, confidently moving between sturdy, flurrying fretboard work on *Die Alone* and *Suicidal*, to the gentle touch of poignant, stripped-back ballad *Sleep With The Devil*. With every full-bodied guitar solo, James Clark's versatile vocals amplify the punch, be that on the timeless metal howler *Broken Bones* or the beastly drums and gristly gutturals on moshpit-bait *Wasting Away*.

FOR FANS OF: Bullet For My Valentine, Avenged Sevenfold, Iron Maiden

EMILY SWINGLE



KOLLAPE

AR

FYSISK FORMAT

Danish post-metallers put their stamp on a well-trodden path

At this point, it's hard to imagine exactly what post-metal can do to top, or even match, the work of the scene's best. Denmark's Kollapse have spent the last decade channelling fellow Scandi acts – the crushing

power of Cult Of Luna and the scabrous, bowel-loosening fury of Breach – hoping to stand shoulder to shoulder with such giants. They're still not quite there, but they've gotten closer now than ever. AR is darkly beautiful, from the harrowingly destructive, scattershot pummelling of *Autofagia* to *Transformation*'s gliding, softly picked opening. It may stick to a well-worn formula, but as the results are enthralling, that's not a problem at all.

FOR FANS OF: Breach, Sumac, Old Man Gloom

STEPHEN HILL



MERRIMACK

Of Grace And Gravity

SEASON OF MIST

Gallic black metal diehards keep their fire contained

Merrimack have kept up their total black metal orthodoxy, bypassing the avant-garde shapes spun by some of their French countrymen. There's little mucking about on this, drummer Blastum merrily doing presumably what he's named for, but when *Omegaphilia* was a strong work seven years ago, it's disheartening to hear a bit of regression. D.G. of Mispyrming lends bonus roars to *Sulphurean Synods*, but it's all a bit swamped. Song structures don't leave a lot of room for moments to burst out, keeping up second-wave black metal's darkness but leaving out much of the heavy metal core that produced its anthems. For all its Satanic bluster. It's only occasionally gripping, the fire clearly powering this band along not one that really spreads.

FOR FANS OF: Watain, Ondskapt, Enthroned

PERRAN HEYLES



MIDNIGHT

Hellish Expectations

METAL BLADE

*Cleveland's black/thrash institution
ramp up the rampage*

Midnight's magic is in their duality. They're a tongue-in-cheek parody of heavy metal excess and an authentic, ride-or-die embrace of it at the same time. Bathory and Bad News in one lusty, leather-bound package. As befitting a band cloaked in legend, Midnight's hooded demiurge Athenar wrote this album in a weekend. The black/thrasher's sixth full-length is a high-velocity plummet into the darkest abyss of fiery rock'n'roll – a hook-filled wallop of blackened speed metal that sounds like mid-'80s Motörhead with a Satanic Chuck Berry ripping jaw-dropping leads all over the place. Every song is a (head)banger, but the autobiographical *Masked And Deadly* and the Venom-ous *Dungeon Lust* will probably fill the most jukeboxes. With its straight-ahead approach and meaty, catchy songs, this may just be Midnight's best album to date.

FOR FANS OF: Venom,
Motörhead, Bathory
KEN MCINTYRE



MONKEY3
Welcome To The Machine
NAPALM

Swiss psych visionaries still drawing on limitless potential

While journeying through time and space, it seems like Swiss psychonauts Monkey3 have chanced

upon two key discoveries: the secret of longevity and a wellspring of boundless inspiration. Their seventh studio album since coalescing back in 2001, *Welcome To The Machine* sees the band exploring the question of artificial intelligence by way of classic sci-fi flicks and vertiginous psych-prog instrumentals. While many bands would have long since run out of puff, Monkey3 harness the joy and excitement of bands a fraction of their age, losing themselves in the surging push and pull of their dizzyingly widescreen ideas. *Rackman* exhibits both swirling, ethereal hauteur and purposeful chug, while the opening moments of *Collapse* are brilliantly grandiose: equal parts Dire Straits and Pelican, somehow. It's a thrilling and genuinely cosmic ride that you feel could easily last forever.

FOR FANS OF: Slift, Chrome, Earthless
ALEX DELLER



MORTA SKULD
Creation Undone

PEACEVILLE

Revitalised death metallers keep the old-school wheel churning

Milwaukee's Morta Skuld have been 'old-school' death metal since that musical style was still young. Their debut *Dying Remains* was released in 1993, but the band never broke out of 'also-ran' status. Time and internal pressures took their toll and the band split; the less said about their stylistic 'nu' changes in the late 90s the better. Founding guitarist/vocalist Dave Gregor returned in 2017 with a new line-up and a return to their original sound. A timely act given

modern death metal's newfound penchant for the old school. This is the third record since their reformation, serving up yet more crushingly direct death metal, the suffocating blasts of *Painful Conflict* and the teeth-gritting grooves of *Into Temptation* being particular highlights. *Creation Undone* is old-school death metal done right.

FOR FANS OF: Malevolent Creation, Obituary, Dying Fetus

TOM O'BOYLE



MR. BISON
Echoes From The Universe
HEAVY PSYCH SOUNDS

Norse myth-driven stoner/psych
from the verdant hills of Tuscany

Hailing from the Italian region of high culture that is Tuscany, this psychedelic stoner quartet explore notions of freedom and destiny through Norse mythology on their fifth LP. It's a subtle twist on a well-trodden sonic formula with few dramatic innovations, but while *Echoes From The Universe* might not offer anything new under the hazy sun, it is executed masterfully. *The Promise* begins with layered vocals and a tolling bell, building suspense expertly before the tension is released with a satisfyingly meaty riff. Elsewhere, on *Dead In The Eye*, warm fuzzy synths usher in a lackadaisical groove that is timed to precise hypnotic perfection. If you're a fan of psych rock, you'll definitely want to add this to your collection, otherwise you won't miss much if you give this trip a swerve.

FOR FANS OF: Pink Floyd, Opeth, Tool

REMFRY DEDMAN



GOST
Prophecy
METAL BLADE

Synthwave's grim reaper heads back towards his roots

GOST HAVE ALWAYS

occupied the darker side of synthwave, but throughout a decade-long career of releasing twisted disco music, it's sometimes felt like progenitor James Lollar has never quite settled on the perfect recipe for his electro-metal concoction.



2019's *Valediction*, with its split-personality approach to genre-mashing, didn't tickle everyone's tastebuds, and 2021's *Rites Of Love And Reverence*, James's account of witch trials through the ages to a backdrop of electro-goth, felt languid compared to the ear-wormy party atmosphere of earlier material like *Skull* and *Behemoth*.

Finding James at a crossroad in his career, he's approached this latest creative work with a heavy dose of self-awareness. "I [also] wanted to reconnect with some of my older fans who maybe didn't feel that album so much," he says, referring to *Valediction*. "I wanted to go back in time and bring some of the older shit back." Indeed, on *Temple Of Tears*, one of *Prophecy's* biggest bangers, there's the familiar throb of synthwave sprinkled with Gost's signature malevolent tones. The track's bass-driven strut is shared by *Golgotha's* pulse-quickenning synthwave, reminiscent of 80s video game soundtracks. And yet it's what happens in between classic synthwave that sets Gost apart.

Obituary fuses rave with terror, as the glitchy beats and harrowing half-tempo passages evoke a disco-in-an-abattoir aesthetic, while the title track's intro of blastbeats and screams catapults the listener into slasher-flick territory. *Deceiver* toys with a similarly torturous setting, flooding the track with black metal screams and atmospheric wails that are also prominent on the caustic *Through The Water*. If James wanted to go back to the "older shit" he's semi-succeeded; the synth is pumping hard. With so many stylistic tweaks and some proper bleak moments on the table, it's not a comfortable ride, but it is an electrifying one.

FOR FANS OF: Carpenter Brut, Godflesh, Health
HOLLY WRIGHT



Ministry's Al Jourgensen: ever vigilant as the world burns

MINISTRY

Hopiumforthemasses

NUCLEAR BLAST

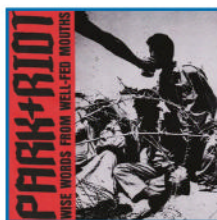
Industrial metal's most relentless agitator gets a spring in his step

NO ONE WILL ever accuse of Al Jourgensen of not being pissed off at the state of the world, no matter what state the world might be in. Volleying acerbic social commentary from behind an aggressive veil of industrial metal driven by regimented drums, lumbering guitars and walls of samples has been Ministry's forte since the late 80s. With the sextet firing on all cylinders after a rigorous post-pandemic touring schedule, the result is *Al*, backed by his live band, writing and recording album number 16. Not bad for a former heroin aficionado who cheated death as often as the lads down the pub would get together for a kick around, eh? These days Uncle Al is spitting in the eye of social media, the insidious distraction of so-called culture wars and planet plundering as he waits with bated breath to be able to utter the phrase, 'the late Donald Trump'.

As is Ministry's MO, news clips and publicly sourced soundbites are woven around masterful power chord stomping, waves of manipulated electronica and Al's rallying-cry bellow. The difference offered by *Hopiumforthemasses* is the sprightly feel the full band provides to furious finger pointers *B.D.E.* and *Goddamn White Trash*, the light-speed thrash of *TV Song 1/6 Edition* and the protest punch of *Aryan Embarrassment*, featuring former Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra.

This recording configuration injects additional life into the pumping groove laid down by Roy Mayorga and keyboardist John Bechdel's textural waves, while Cesar Soto and Monte Pittman palm mute and wail like a string-burning thrash tandem from the 80s. Enmeshed among the lashing out, there are neat tricks like new wave key swells on *New Religion*, soul singer backing vocals on *Cult Of Suffering* and acoustic soundscapes on *It's Not Pretty*, that make for a denser and much more engrossing listen.

FOR FANS OF: Prong, Godflesh, Treponem Pal
KEVIN STEWART-PANKO



PARK+RIOT

Wise Words From Well-Fed Mouths

THIS CHARMING MAN

German noise rock two-piece bring a piledriver to your pressure points

Aggressive two-pieces have a habit of either steeping themselves in distortion or going for a condensed, minimalist approach that goes straight for the jugular. Leipzig-based Park+Riot do both. They're an amalgam of savage hardcore and discordant noise that cements the idea that two heads can be just as potent as a full band. The use of octave pedals, an often essential sound thickener for a duo hellbent on making a racket, gives *Clouds* a thick, sludgy quality that hits like a sledgehammer to the solar plexus. They also show flashes of restraint on *Cure* and *Goodbye*, which gives these 10 songs a flow that remains engaging throughout. A debut album that's full of promise.

FOR FANS OF: Lightning Bolt, '68, Cult Leader
REMFRY DEDMAN



PISSED JEANS

Half Divorced

SUB POP

NY noiseniks turn the world of adult responsibility into a riot

Getting old sucks, but you don't have to retire to a couch to experience time's perpetual motion. These New Yorkers have been pissing their pants for 20 years through marriages, divorces, fatherhood, aches, pains and responsibility when all they want to do

is tear around with the top down listening to Big Black. As Pissed Jeans are wont to do, they take what's in front of them and flip it on its head. Lyrically, this means poking adulting markers like *Helicopter Parent* and *Sixty-Two Thousand Dollars In Debt* with a sarcasm stick while not standing still musically as they brilliantly run noise rock, pop-punk, hardcore, sludge and foot stomping rock through a discordant wringer.

FOR FANS OF: Metz, Rocket From The Crypt, Melvins
KEVIN STEWART-PANKO



PONTE DEL DIAVOLO

Fire Blades From The Tomb

SEASON OF MIST

Occult blackened doom debutants invoke the unearthly

For a brief moment, Ponte Del Diavolo's debut sounds like it might almost be typical. The album's initial tooth-and-claw scrabble speaks to roughly a zillion other black metal bands, but everything changes as soon as Elena Camusso joins the fray. Less a singer than some immortal priestess invoking demonic forces, her breathless sung-spoken vocals cast an evocative pall over proceedings, making it seem like the sky above has been blotted out by an enormous murder of crows. From this point on the band giddily combine occult doom drippings, corpse-painted bombast and gauzily sensuous goth rock melodies in a manner that mightn't satisfy genre purists, but, for the open-minded, represents the howling, tumultuous birth of a brand-new witch cult.

FOR FANS OF: Cloakroom, The Gault, The Devil's Blood
ALEX DELLER

WORLD SERVICE

Heavy metal uprisings from around the globe



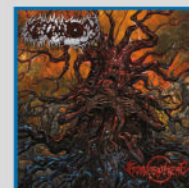
AGONISTA

Grey And Dry

ARMAGEDDON

This Mexican quartet walk a fine line between raging crustpunk aggression and rock'n'roll swagger on their debut. The d-beat-powered *Abuse Diffuse* comes across like a bar brawl between Disrupt and Zeke.

KEZ WHELAN



CERCENATORY

GoreSphere

COMATOSE MUSIC

In the early 00s, only the Colombians could match the Californian DM scene's brutality, albeit with a more chaotic edge. Cercenatory follow that example but with an up-to-date but no less punishing sound.

OLIVIER BADIN



MOOM

Plague Infested Urban Dump Of The Future

SELF-RELEASED

Harking back to the early 80s UK crust scene, this is breathless powerviolence from the Israeli collective. It's all roadrunner pace, chainsaw guitars and sublimely savage grinding.

STEPHEN HILL



PRAISE THE PLAGUE

LIFEFORCE

*Humanity-scorning black metal
with extra, bottom-end brutality*

“Human beings are the only creatures on Earth that claim a God, and the only living thing that behaves like it hasn’t got one,” laments *A Serpent’s Tongue* on Praise The Plague’s third album. That’s the level of grim misanthropy on this dingy if well-produced cave of modern black metal. Tempering those unearthly frequencies with viscous doom could still be a relatively untapped keg compared to shinier post-black metal, and PTP bring low, brutal bass to the genre and a tar-thick ambience. It could become suffocatingly monotonous, but six tracks of it proves just right, and the ominous drones of closer *Throne Of Decay* still manage to let a bit of climactic beauty into an album made for stewing in despondency and feeling shit about life.



FOR FANS OF: Mizmor, The Great Old Ones, The Ruins Of Beverast

PERRAN HEYLES



SATURNALIA TEMPLE
Paradigm Call
LISTENABLE

Swedish occult doom outlaws swing like a noose

Despite the fact their songs are generally dedicated to matters of witchcraft and the occult rather than bong hits, Saturnalia Temple are one of the most convincingly stoned doom

bands around. *Paradigm Call* is heroically drugged-out and bilious, with a sound that comes so close to Electric Wizard's maximalist filth that it could easily have been recorded in the Dorset legends' bin shed. Band mastermind Tommy Eriksson has led this trio since 2006, and it's his primitive but rapacious riffs and icy snarl that define the lumbering likes of *Revel In Dissidence*. A new rhythm section comprising two former members of Swedish occult icons In Solitude has added more swing and swagger to the Temple tempo, but even when tapping directly into the Sabbathian mainframe on the title track, Tommy favours wading through the mulch over getting his groove on.



FOR FANS OF: Electric Wizard, Ufomammut, Bongzilla

DOM LAWSON



SENTRY
Sentry

HIGH ROLLER

Former Manilla Road members keep the cult alive

Manilla Road were arguably the best-kept secret in metal, blending mystical bardic atmospheres with marauding, battle-ready chops over a 40-year career. When founding frontman Mark Shelton died in 2018, a unique, eccentric voice was tragically silenced. Former roadie Bryan Patrick had been recruited to help Mark with the high notes on MR's post-millennial comeback: a thankless task, but it stood him in good stead for Sentry, a group featuring three-quarters of MR's last line-up. Bryan's voice has a clarity and power of its own

(their Candlemass cover *Incarnation Of Evil* is a shrewd vocal showcase), while inevitably summoning shades of Mark's nasal valour. Guitarist Kalli Coldsmitth had no MR connections, so his riffs are rather less otherworldly, more industry standard, but Sentry's lurid, doomy, sparkingly produced debut undeniably betokens a class act.



FOR FANS OF: Slough Feg, Manilla Road, Manowar

CHRIS CHANTLER



SKELETAL REMAINS

Fragments Of The Ageless

CENTURY MEDIA

West Coast death metallers highlight their savage side

Formed in 2011, California's Skeletal Remains were ahead of the curve when it comes to the old-school death metal resurgence we're currently basking in. After upping their game considerably with 2020's darker, atmospheric *The Entombment Of Chaos*, the quartet sound more straightforwardly savage on their fifth full-length, offering some of the most aggressive, technical material they've recorded. The frantic blasting – performed with ruthless efficiency by new drummer Pierce Williams – and dual screeched and guttural vocals of vicious opener *Relentless Appetite* reek of Deicide in their prime, while the rolling double-kick and skull-crushing grooves of *To Conquer The Devout* hint at Gateways... – era Morbid Angel. A solid slab of no-nonsense DM and arguably Skeletal Remains' most directly punishing yet.

FOR FANS OF: Deicide, Morbid Angel, Pestilence



KEZ WHELAN



NEW YEARS DAY

Half Black Heart

CENTURY MEDIA

Anaheim's alt rock icons go back to the future

WITH THE ORIGINAL

line-up back together, New Years Day have risen from the ashes with a revitalised sound. Visually, their latest release could be straight from 2013, what with Ash Costello gripping at a bloody heart, hair dyed her signature red/black split, yet the sonic content is a sharp evolution for the goth veterans. Just as 2019's *Unbreakable* teased a divergence from their old-school sound – a cocktail of choppy, buoyant pop-punk-infused alt metal – *Half Black Heart* is its final nail in the coffin. And the result is striking, even if it does sacrifice some of New Years Day's charm.

Five albums deep, the gaggle of goths have gear-shifted to focus on swelling, arena-worthy hard rock anthems. Everywhere you look, these alt metallers have crafted gorgeous, captivating soundscapes; *Burn It All Down*'s furious majesty is devastating, while *Fearless* really packs a punch, with its scratching howls reinforcing Ash's weightless, triumphant vocals. Yet there's a striking lack of NYD's hallmark restlessness.

Half Black Heart is a far more streamlined listen than previous work. Maturing is healthy, but the band have sacrificed their penchant for frenzied nu metal rhythmic shifts. The album is often predictable, finding the band cool, calm and collected, delivering fury with a measured hand. The result is powerful, but you're left with an itch for something less conventional, a little more sporadic.

That's not to say the record is totally cookie-cutter – there's still the classic Halloween-drunk gothic musing throughout, and industrial-tinged venom is scattered throughout tracks like the narcissist-scorning *Vampyre*, while *Hurts Like Hell* is a balls-to-the-wall, stadium-filling banger. *Half Black Heart* is halfway there. It showcases a formidable hard rock confidence, yet would greatly benefit from that fearless unpredictability of their youth.



FOR FANS OF: *Halestorm*, *In This Moment*, *Butcher Babies*
EMILY SWINGLE





Techno Animal: still the most seismic matter in the universe

TECHNO ANIMAL

The Brotherhood Of The Bomb

RELAPSE

Justin Broadrick and The Bug bring back the fucking noise

ORIGINALLY RELEASED ON

September 11, 2001, Techno Animal's industrial hip hop masterpiece was not particularly well-timed. In every other respect, *The Brotherhood Of The Bomb* was a work of prescient genius.

One of many projects with Godflesh legend Justin Broadrick in cahoots with Kevin Martin, aka The Bug, Techno Animal had already made the mother of all cosmic trip hop records with 1995's major label behemoth *Re-Entry*, but this was a far more radical endeavour.

Built upon a series of grotesque and distorted beats, and with an army of underground MCs spitting fire, these songs were far too weird and gnarly for the mainstream rap crowd, but too firmly entrenched in hip hop culture to immediately convince the noise brigade. But therein lies the brilliance of absurdly heavy boom-bap assaults like *Cruise Mode 101* and *Hypertension*; TA were always militantly genre-averse and seemed cantankerous enough to often be pushing boundaries out of sheer spite.

From that myopic, mischievous mindset came some of the heaviest,



bass-powered electronic music ever conceived. Self-evident antecedents of Public Enemy's epoch-shattering Bomb Squad productions of the late 80s, songs like *DC-10*, *Freefall* and *Piranha* (not an Exodus cover, sadly) bring the bleak clatter of DIY industrial and underground hip hop's gritty swagger together in a shower of fractured, overdriven noise.



In comparison with the vast majority of mainstream hip hop, now or back then, *The Brotherhood Of The Bomb* still sounds like a warning beamed down from some hostile planet with much cooler, more destructive military hardware than us. And bigger speakers. Worth buying (again) for *We Can Build You*, featuring Run The Jewels' El-P back in his Company Flow days, this has been repackaged with typical craft and care by Relapse Records, as an immortal classic is remastered and reborn on vinyl where it belongs.

FOR FANS OF: The Bug, Dälek, Public Enemy
DOM LAWSON



SUICIDAL ANGELS
Profane Prayer

NUCLEAR BLAST

Greek thrashers keep the faith with album number eight

Suicidal Angels have been plying their heads-down thrash wares since shortly after the turn of the century, and they've no intentions of stopping now. Opener *When The Lions Die* ushers things in with a lick of classic metal melodicism, but they're soon hitting the choppy riffs and snarling, snapping tempos they've been honing for so long. The Exodus and Slayer references are all present and correct, but *Profane Prayer* does throw up a couple of new moves. Most notable is lengthy closer *The Fire Paths Of Fate*, which brings in proggy passages and ethereal vocals. The results are mixed, but the track does provide something other than effectively formulaic thrash.

FOR FANS OF: Exodus, Warbringer, Evile
PAUL TRAVERS



SULDUSK

Antithesis

NAPALM

Folk/black metallers show their soft and their savage side

The second album from Melbourne's Suldusk blends blackgaze and folk in a bolder manner than 2019 debut, *Lunar Falls*. Emily Highfield has expanded her initial solo venture into a full-blown band, upping her firepower. *Lunar Falls* leaned heavily on the folk side. *Antithesis* is full-on from the outset and *Verdalet*

launches straight into blastbeats underpinning Emily's gently soaring vocals, as she descends into torrid screams over a spiteful riff. From there, soft alternates with hard, the dreamlike folk of *Crowns Of Esper* followed by the majestic power of *Crystalline*, creating disarming peaks and troughs. An ambitious leap into more intense climes, Suldusk still need to combine their influences in a more organic fashion.

FOR FANS OF: Myrkur, Sylvaine, Darkher



TOADLIQUOR
Back In The Hole

BACK IN THE SOUTHERN LORD

Sickening sludge enigmas ooze back from the sewers

New Toadliquor material surfacing is a worrying portent, like mutations in livestock, impossible cloven hoofprints in the snow or the moon turning blood-red. Their criminally overlooked debut appeared in the early 90s just as sludge metal was finding its footing: a grotesque dolmen hewn of wire, shit and broken teeth that remains largely unequalled when it comes to misery and spiritual degradation. That *Back In The Hole* doesn't quite plumb the same putrid depths is perhaps inevitable, but it certainly comes close. Atonal, crust-blasted riffs groan and lurch; feedback is splashed like sick over cobblestones and hernia-inducing vocals speak to whole universes of psychic pain. There is nothing good or happy here, but that is entirely as it should be.

FOR FANS OF: Noothgrush,
Moros, Grief

ALEX DELLER



VOLCANDRA
The Way Of Ancients
PROSTHETIC

Melodic extreme metallers embark on an epic adventure

High fantasy meets melodic extremity on Volcandra's second album. The Kentuckians' love for Diablo and Conan is clear as the band push their boundaries. Black metal was a keystone influence on their 2020 debut *Into The Azure*. Here its presence is still felt, but within a hybridised war beat with the sharpness of thrash, the punch of melodeath and an affray of killer solos. It makes for an epic experience from the moment battle commences on opener *Birth Of The Nephalem*, which, after a suitably valiant intro, attacks with buzzsaw guitars set to 'flay'. *Fouled Sanctity* follows, chosen by the band as lead single due to the immediacy and intensity of its violence. Volcandra are having good escapist fun and want you along as a party member.

FOR FANS OF: *Eternal Champion*, *Noctule*, *Three Inches Of Blood*

TOM O'BOYLE



PER WIBERG
The Serpent's Here
DESPOTZ

Melodic meditations from former Opeth keyboardist

Per Wiberg's feeling loosey-goosey this time around. The Swedish keyboardist extraordinaire first went solo on 2019's *Head Without Eyes*, and it was exactly what you'd expect it to be:

the dusty stoner rock of Spiritual Beggars (with whom he's tinkled the ivories since 1998) examined through the proggy lens of his famed former outfit, Opeth. Here, Per again handles not just keys, but vocals and guitar, and has kept broadly the same vision despite stating he encouraged more improvisation from his backing musicians this time around. This results in expansive ventures like *This House Is Someone Else's* Now, which swims in layers of fuzz bass, spontaneous drums and lingering, gothic atmospherics. Refined melodies like those of *Follow The Unknown* still show Per in complete control, however, making this second outing both signature and surprising.

FOR FANS OF: Spiritual Beggars, Monster Magnet, Type O Negative

MATT MILLS



WITCH CLUB SATAN
Witch Club Satan
SELF-RELEASED

*Feminist empowerment from
Norway's new black metal coven*

A maelstrom of blackened artistry, this Norwegian trio's stunning debut reverberates with the icepick ferocity of classic Norwegian black metal while infusing it with a fresh, rebellious spirit. Blistering tracks like *Birth*, *Reverse This Fuck* and *Black Metal Is Krig* embody their tempestuous cauldron of blastbeats, scything riffs and shrieking, reverb-drenched vocals. Powerhouse production, courtesy of Anders Odden (Celtic Frost, Satyricon), creates a near-impenetrable auditory wall. Amid this intensity, *Mother Sea* emerges as a mesmerising composition of ethereal balladry.

Released on International Women's Day, the tracks explore themes of feminist empowerment and occult lore, investing these tracks with real gravitas. Witch Club Satan haven't merely entered the black metal arena, they've stormed it, brandishing a banner of innovation and audacity.

FOR FANS OF: Watain, Asagraum, Tsjuder

JOE DALY



ZAKK SABBATH
Doomed Forever
Forever Doomed
MAGNETIC EYE

Zakk Wylde and friends return to Ozz for a double dose of tribute

While the band's moniker may raise a smile, this Zakk Wilde-fronted trio are deadly serious about their devotion to Black Sabbath. Their second album sees the band, completed by Ozzy bassist Blasko and ex-QOTSA drummer Joey Castillo, continue to cover the metal kings' back catalogue. This time they dust down *Paranoid* and *Master Of Reality*. Wisely realising it's tough to improve on near-perfection – the former is one of the most important metal albums of all time, while the latter features some of Tony Iommi's finest riffs and is credited for fathering stoner rock, after all – Zakk reins in his trademark pinched harmonics and fretboard acrobatics throughout and faithfully replicates the likes of *Iron Man*, *War Pigs* and *Sweet Leaf*. It's not essential listening, but it is a lot of fun hearing these all-stars crank out evergreen classics.

FOR FANS OF: Black Label Society, Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne

EDWIN McFEE



VLTIMAS

Epic
SEASON OF MIST

Death and black metal legends reunite for a bigger blast of bombast

SUCH IS THE proclivity for extreme metal musicians to embark on multiple projects that death, doom and black metal supergroups aren't as rare as found in more commercial echelons. But even by these metrics, the résumés of its members ensured Vltimas's arrival came with more expectations. However, it was that very gravitas of frontman David Vincent that became the hitch with 2019's *Something Wicked Marches In*. With his position as death metal's most recognisable voice, his trademark roars and decipherable diction meant even the most well-executed proposition couldn't help but sound like, and thus be compared to, Morbid Angel's unattainable heights.

Where this follow-up thrives is Rune ‘Blasphemer’ Eriksen’s riffs bringing more of an icy, grandiose feel than the more intricate, warped labyrinth of its predecessor. The chemistry of the band is instantly more organic and results in *Epic* living up to its title, treading the line between imperious grandeur and ridiculous pomposity. Never is this more apparent than on the title track’s subversive crawl, with David revelling in a full baritone bellow, and *Mephisto Manifesto*’s histrionic march, like 1349 covering Judas Priest.

After quenching his thirst for violent blasting on Cryptopsy's recent triumphant return, Flo Mounier uses his powder sparingly, indulging in speed on the aptly titled *Scorcher*, while elsewhere laying a sturdier foundation for the likes of *Miserere* and *Invictus*'s stately ceremony. *Exercitus Irae*'s nefarious atmosphere spits fiendish venom and ostentatious clout, while *Spoils Of War*, with its grim riffs that suddenly summon a glorious trad metal lead, is another leftfield bolt.

While *Epic* is still undoubtedly dense and masterfully crafted, three luminaries of metal's underbelly having such an enjoyable time creating an unashamedly bombastic affair is reason enough to applaud its triumph.

FOR FANS OF: Morbid Angel, Behemoth, God Dethroned
ADAM BRENNAN



LIVE REVIEWS

BRING ME THE HORIZON
BAD OMENS / CASSYETTE / STATIC DRESS

AO ARENA, MANCHESTER

Sheffield's electro-metal behemoths lead the charge into the future

OLI SYKES GAZES out at the Manchester AO arena, as if seeing it for the first time. His view from the stage must be magical: thousands of phone lights twinkle and dance, and the atmosphere in the room seems charged with electricity, but the Bring Me The Horizon singer's eyes are focused way up, towards the Gods. "We've played here before, haven't we?" he asks his bandmates. "But I never knew there were seats right up there."

It is, in fact, the second time Sheffield's genre-mashing pop-metal behemoth have played this venue, but the first time they've sold it out. It's testament to their ever-evolving story, but tonight isn't just about them. Having built a reputation for championing new acts – their last two UK tours saw them take out a rising Nova Twins, and Fever333 – this bill feels similarly finger-on-the-pulse.

First, **STATIC DRESS** rampage through a set of angles and shards. Their sound is a burst of glammy vitriol that nods to Alexisonfire, Thrice and Glassjaw, while the likes of *Disposable Care* and *Clean* sound as though they could teeter off the rails at any moment, burning with potential. Nu gen star **CASSYETTE** switches up the vibe with a barefoot stomp through nu metal and synth-heavy industrial, her shapeshifting voice turning *Petrichor*, *September Rain* and the excellently tongue-in-cheek *Dear Goth* into future anthems.

As the road crew unveil **BAD OMENS'** backdrop, an excited cheer goes up from the crowd. The Virginian metalcore quartet are indisputably the band of the moment, having gone stratospheric with their 2022 album, *The Death Of Peace Of Mind*: a record that straddled metalcore, electronica and the kind of soulful, R'n'B-inspired pop you'd expect from The Weeknd. Their show is arena-ready in its own right, incorporating pyro, ominous visuals and atmospheric lighting that



perfectly captures the icy and sensual aspects of their sound. But the main focus is vocalist and superstar-in-waiting, Noah Sebastian. He's easily one of the best singers in the alternative scene right now, as he stalks the stage, segueing seamlessly between powerful gutturals on the hyper-aggressive *Artificial Suicide* and elastic cleans on top-tier bangers *Nowhere To Go* and *Just Pretend*. It's impossible to say how long it will be until Bad Omens are selling out venues like this on their own, but the fact there's barely an empty seat in the house for the entirety of their set tells you exactly where they're headed.

BRING ME THE HORIZON are sheer spectacle. Coming off the band's headline slot at Download Festival, this feels like a victory lap, and they've brought along the eye-popping stage production that helped to make that performance such a moment. Joined by dancers, an endless torrent of fire, and an AI screen character called EVE, who is hellbent on the destruction of humanity, there are multiple kaleidoscopic backdrops, which initially turn the AO Arena into an abandoned, stained-glass church.

At this point in their career, BMTH have too many fan-favourites to fit into one set. After anthemic opener *DarkSide*, they rip through a gargantuan *Empire (Let Them Sing)*, from 2013's seminal *Sempiternal*, while thousands of voices unite in a massive bellow-along for *MANTRA* and *Teardrops*.

Just weeks before this tour began, the sudden departure of long-time keyboardist Jordan Fish, a pivotal guiding force for Bring Me's sound over the last decade, caused consternation among fans. Sure, his absence is felt, all the electronics played via backing tracks, but the band are a tightly polished machine. A red-hot rendition of new single

Kool-Aid – the band's first without Jordan – accompanied by huge, freaky visuals of a leering winged, cyborg cherub who orchestrates the circle-pit, should assuage fears for the security of their future. Of course, it helps too that Oli has become a world-class frontman. Having struggled with his voice over the years, here he doesn't drop a note, nailing everything from raw cleans on the acoustic *sTraNgeRs*, to blunt-force savagery on *Diamonds Aren't Forever* – a rare throwback cut that shows just how far the band have come since their polarising deathcore days.

That said, tonight celebrates the fans just as much as the band's journey to the upper echelons of metal. Having postponed the release of their forthcoming album, *Post Human: NeX Gen*, to the summer, they ask the crowd to sing a few lines for an unfinished song. The result is a baffled 21,000-strong crowd bellowing, "HELLO OLI, YOU FUCKING KNOB-HEAD" at the top of their lungs, much to the band's amusement.

"After 20 years, I have no idea why anyone still comes to see us," Oli muses, but an encore of *Doomed*, *LoST* and euphoric closer *Throne* proves exactly why. As fountains of pyro shoot upwards, lasers fire in every direction and the crowd goes batty again, there's not one person not grinning their face off, as we all watch the UK's biggest heavy band do what they do best.

DANNII LEIVERS

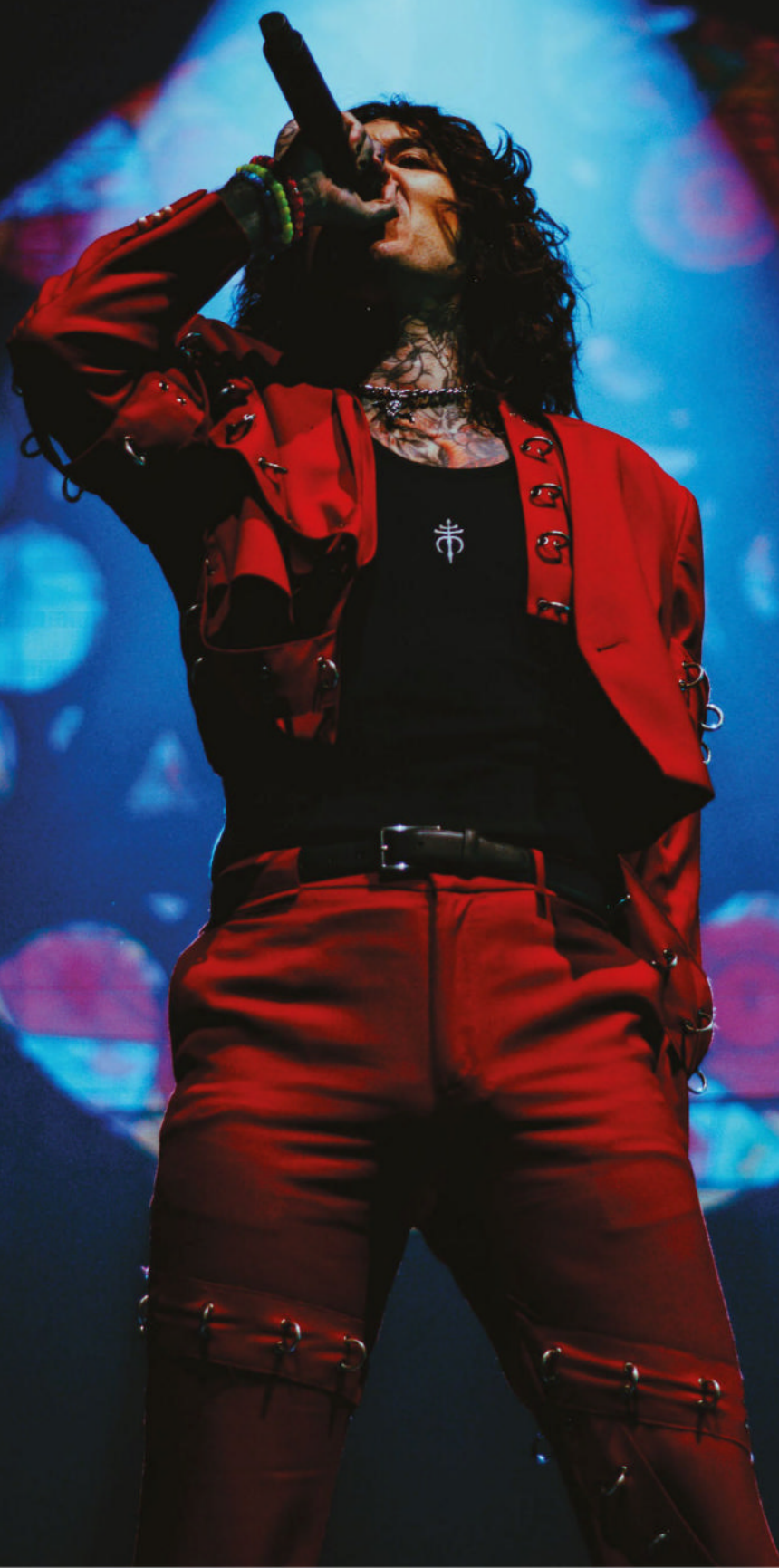
THE SET
BRING ME THE
HORIZON

DarkSide
Empire
(Let Them Sing)
MANTRA
Teardrops
AmEN!
Kool-Aid
Shadow Moses
Obey
DiE4u
Kingslayer
sTraNgeRs
(Acoustic)
Diamonds Aren't
Forever
Parasite Eve
Antivist
Drown
Can You Feel
My Heart

ENCORE:

Doomed
LoST
Throne

Oli Sykes: a modern
metal star



Cabal get high on anxiety



CABAL

VISCERA / VEXED

REBELLION, MANCHESTER

Denmark's deathcore deliverers look on the bright side of despair

IT'S A GLOOMY Tuesday, but Danish howlers Cabal have managed to lure a healthy crowd into the pits of Manchester's Rebellion for an evening of monolithic, djent-tinged fury. While the room isn't fit to burst, punters are more than making up for it in terms of enthusiasm; everyone present is eager to see how the band will up the ante for their first ever headline tour.

An impressive pair of supports are in tow to ensure the evening is a knock-out. As alt-metallers **VEXED** take to the stage, vocalist Megan Targett immediately throws herself into the thick of opener *Lay Down Your Flowers*, plaits swinging as she stomps and snarls in anguish. *X My <3 (Hope To Die)* only stokes the fire, Megan's hellish growls of 'It's too late!' rumbling in your gut before frazzled, tech-injected breakdowns seize control. Gutturals run thin here and there, but Megan is a true performer, and you can't help but lose yourself in her rampant whirlwind of rage.

Deathcore juggernauts **VISCERA** follow up Vexed perfectly, knocking out dizzying blastbeats right out of the gates, *Carcinogenesis* an all-consuming wall of horrifying noise. Frontman Jamie Graham is absolutely impeccable, a formidable beast of horrifying gutturals that often swerve into pig snarl territory. He commands the crowd like he's looking for a trouble as his dominant, confident swagger urges on circle-pits with ease. When closer *Sungazer* rolls around, it's as if Viscera have pulled off a headline set, having got the crowd sweating and restless.

When **CABAL** make their grand appearance, the room is submerged into a realm of sweltering doom – that is, if you ignore the fact their gear is covered with adorable flowers. As opener *If I Hang, Let Me Swing* grinds out of the speakers, Andreas Bjulver's scratching growls of 'Existence is suffering!' cut like a knife, yet he's always grinning from ear to ear. Fans adore the clash of joy and insidious sorrow, eagerly chanting Andreas's name like he's an old friend. "OK, let's play some more songs about fucking dying," he laughs at one point, before bursting into the soul-crushing grit of *Exit Wound*. From new track *Still Cursed* to closer *Exsanguination*, the crowd eagerly mosh along. Andreas closes things off by passing the mic to the fans who have been hopping onstage all evening, topping off a brilliant evening of deathcore bliss.

EMILY SWINGLE

Vexed: the next generation of forward-thinking metal



Viscera's set goes by in a BLEURGH



BRITISH LION

TONY MOORE'S AWAKE

BLACK BOX, HASTINGS

Playing at the behest of Steve Harris, who once hired and quickly fired him as an early member of Iron Maiden, one-man entertainer **TONY MOORE** performs an abridged version of his forthcoming prog-rock opus, *Awake*. Considering that several of its tracks resemble Pink Floyd, tonight's crowd in Hastings is surprisingly tolerant. On **BRITISH LION**'s earliest tours, it was tempting to dismiss them as a vanity project for Steve Harris, but 13 years later they've become a proper concern with huge improvements right across the board. Where thinly disguised expectations of being a mini-Maiden once bubbled beneath the surface, now there's a narrative, an identity, and a body of songs that is still being added to. Shaven-headed, wiry and intense, frontman Richard Taylor has learned how to project and interact with the audience. All five members know their roles, though of course Steve is the focal point, mouthing silently along to every word – the very epitome of commitment. In a 280-capacity room such as the Black Box, his chunka-chunka basslines punch you in the gut, though this is very much a group performance, and one that will live long in the memory.

DAVE LING

KINGDOM OF GIANTS

PROFILER

DOWNSTAIRS AT THE DOME, LONDON

Nu metal is big business again, and **PROFILER** know it. The trio blend throwback bouncing grooves with the sheen of modern metalcore, guitarist and vocalist Mike Evans often handing his axe over to bassist Joe Johnson to bound around the small stage and deliver smooth flows and grungy choruses. Their polished set belies their relatively young age as a band, and the crowd happily bounce and even pit for their final songs. On record, **KINGDOM OF GIANTS** are an amalgamation of every modern metalcore trope. Live, they're thunderously loud, though that's due in part to an overpowering drum mix for the first few songs. The energy is sky-high from the off despite the relatively small turnout. The band don't seem fazed, though. Frontman Dana Willax eggs the crowd on to go harder whenever he's not screaming his lungs out, and the moshpit that swallows the front of the room early on barely lets up. The band pull extensively from their latest record, *Passenger*, which only serves to keep the room swirling. It might be metalcore exactly like you've heard before, but it's delivered with a total conviction that deserves such dedicated fans.

WILL MARSHALL

BURY TOMORROW

WE CAME AS ROMANS

STYLUS, LEEDS

UK metalcore barnstormers steel themselves for the next big leap

IF METALCORE IS a dirty word, no one told the fans crammed into every orifice of Leeds University Union. With Architects, Bring Me The Horizon and Parkway Drive all making the step up to arenas over the last decade, there's a sense that bands need to evolve past the boundaries of the genre in order to reach metal's upper levels. Tonight, Bury Tomorrow are making their bid. They've sold out this UK run, and, having released *The Seventh Sun* last year – the heaviest, darkest album of their career and one that threw more than a few sonic curveballs – they stand poised to take that next step.

Main support **WE CAME AS ROMANS** explode onto the stage in a fireball of energy. From bouncy opener *Darkbloom* to fan fave *Black Hole*, they make the kind of standard metalcore that the leaders of the genre are eschewing for more creative exploits, but it's infectious and the room instantly ignites.

When **BURY TOMORROW** hit the stage, it feels like a completely different ballgame. Everything about them screams heavyweight: from brutal opener *The Seventh Sun* to the way frontman Dani Winter-Bates stalks the stage like a predatorial grizzly, between lung-bursting growls and screams that border on Will Ramos-esque pig squeals. The newer material has added unmistakable weight to their set, but there's plenty of anthemia, conducted by new keyboardist and clean singer Tom Prendergast, and the energy never dissipates. The band knew exactly what they were doing when they wrote the nu metal mosh call 'How could they do that to us?' on *Abandon Us*, although the crowd go just as wild when faced with the razor-sharp melodicism of earlier material such as *Man On Fire* and *An Honourable Reign*. When they chuck out an ecstatic *Black Flame*, and Dani orders a surge of crowd-surfers over the barrier, the security lining the stage visibly steel themselves.

This isn't the first time the band have headlined this venue, and they've undoubtedly outgrown it. Colour-shifting screens, platforms and blasts of CO2 provide even more wow factor, but it's not just the production that feels made for larger venues. Their final run of material tonight – a colossal *Heretic*, the glorious and towering *Cannibal*, and the prog-tinged explorations of closer *DEATH (Ever Colder)* – sends the room into spasms all over again. If there's any justice in the world, they'll be the next to make the step up.

DANNII LEIVERS



We Came As Romans stand up for metalcore

KATIA OGRIN



Bury Tomorrow: Dani Winter-Bates prepares for the next big leap

South Of Salem get their wings on home turf

SOUTH OF SALEM

INME

02 ACADEMY, BOURNEMOUTH

Bournemouth's fast-rising hard rock revivalists bask in hometown pride

THE GROWING BUZZ around South Of Salem could scarcely feel any stronger than here, in this amusingly wedding cakey venue (originally a Victorian circus) in Bournemouth. Despite lying on a line of latitude considerably north of Salem, this Dorset seaside resort is the band's hometown, and the Academy's capacity is double that of their last local show a year ago.

Audience age demographics are startlingly varied for an underground band just launching their second album; it's tempting to wonder if these bandmates (singer Joey Draper, guitarists Kodi Kasper and Fish MacDonald, bassist Dee Aldwell and drummer James Clarke) have stacked the place with all their old schoolmates and extended families. Elderly rockers rub shoulders with blue-haired teen punks, middle-aged goths, battle-vested 20-somethings, glam grannies and several parent-child groups, everyone greeting each other with smiles and hugs. At least half the crowd is bedecked in SOS's nondescript monochrome merch (Microsoft Paintbrush logo, utilitarian pentagram, faintly silly coffin-with-wings insignia). The show of support and pride in the local boys made good is wholesomely palpable.

During **INME**'s support slot, bars and merch tables throng with such boisterous hubbub it almost drowns out the Essex quintet's low-key alt rock, which is nevertheless well received by a respectable cohort of diehards. The party really starts with the introductory playback of *Livin' On A Prayer* and *Pour Some Sugar On Me*, whipping the crowd giddy with good vibes only slightly jarred by the appearance of solemn pallbearers carrying a coffin along the lower

balcony. They process onstage, placing the casket on a catafalque; up pops Joey, to a wall of delighted squeals, and **SOUTH OF SALEM** launch into their by-now traditional opening one-two of *Let Us Prey* and *The Hate In Me*.

The band's peachy-keen vigour is initially undermined by a muddy sound that leaves whole solos inaudible, but the neon coffins, understated pyro and dancing cheerleaders prove sufficient distractions.

Even before sound levels are optimised, it's clear Joey's charismatic stage presence is only matched by the unwavering strength of his voice, and each bandmate brings his own singular energy to the stage. Once the sound balances, the precociously consistent quality of songcraft impresses most, SOS sounding like they've picked the choicest cuts from several records, not just two (plus *Rebel Yell*). Bringing a contemporary edge to a sound rooted in the monsters of 80s rock/metal, SOS can set their sights on the big time: next stop, Bournemouth International Centre?

CHRIS CHANTLER



INME try to rise to the occasion

FUMING MOUTH CELESTIAL SANCTUARY / CRUELTY

NEW CROSS INN, LONDON

South London's New Cross Inn is its own, unruly ecosystem, regularly host to extreme bands old and new, and each gig a committed, community-driven powder keg. Hosting a two-night festival, Reality Unfolds, the venue's been packed all day, and the crowd are primed for **CRUELTY**'s feral diatribes. Their blackened apocalyptic hardcore sounds like they've taken to the streets in the aftermath of a city-consuming fireball. Cambridge's **CELESTIAL SANCTUARY** add grandeur to the savagery, finding a sick spot between abyssal old-school death metal and the scene's new breed, replacing occult vibes with cutthroat sweep-picking and modern technical nous. It's a potent, mountain-pummelling brew, uniting headbangers and moshpitters alike. Massachusetts' **FUMING MOUTH** ignite new levels of chaos, punters flying across the room like those cartoon fight-clouds with limbs, ampersands and hash marks sticking out. Their corroded chug offers an anchor of dread, but it's bristling with Mark Whelan's charred vocals and panicked, luminous riffs like a star being kicked into going supernova. They course between doomy trawls and epic conflagrations, and the oddly Linkin Park-esque chorus on *The Silence Beyond Life* offers one brief moment of anthemic relief.

JONATHAN SELZER

SAINT AGNES

DEVILS DOG, BIRMINGHAM

Such is the unwavering defiance of rising East London quartet Saint Agnes that even an initially sparse crowd can't extinguish their alt punk fire. They barely pause for breath from one blistering wall of sound to the next, with rage-propelled cuts *Bloodsuckers* and *Animal* landing like grenades, the former a cranium-rattling, festival-ready anthem. A wide-eyed Kitty A. Austen stomps over every available inch of space, her manicured bark of 'I GOT NO MORE FUCKS TO GIVE!' inciting bodies to smash relentlessly together during *I Mean Nothing To You*. Given Kitty's recent loss of her mother, it's intense but nonetheless riveting to witness the frontwoman in the throes of a cathartic release on stripped-back ballad *This Is Not The End* as she joins the punters below, with every soaring cry soaked up and those ambient echoes enveloping all in attendance. There's a smattering of *Vampire*-era tracks for fans to sink their teeth into, but tonight's sonic inferno concludes in riotous fashion courtesy of *Follow You*'s squealing guitars and fuzz-drenched beats. It's an accomplished and affecting experience that's sure to see this fanbase flourish further.

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

Metal Allegiance mark a decade of keeping the faith



Metal's stars align at the House Of Blues



METAL ALLEGIANCE

HOUSE OF BLUES, ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

Metal legends reconvene in the land where dreams come true

A DECADE AGO, after medical issues forced Megadeth to pull out of the inaugural Motörboat cruise, a ragtag group featuring members of other acts onboard banded together as Metal Allegiance, filling the gap with two sets of covers by the likes of Pantera, Sabbath and Maiden. Ten years – and two albums of original material – later, the band are commemorating their anniversary in epic fashion with the return of their annual performance at NAMM, a musical instrument convention that takes place a stone's throw from Disneyland.

All-star NAMM jams can frequently lack structure and feature sloppy performances, but that's not the case with Metal Allegiance. The group's 'core four' are prodigal Dream Theater drummer Mike Portnoy, Testament guitarist Alex Skolnick, Dieth and ex-Megadeth bassist David Ellefson

and bassist Mark Menghi. They're joined, as ever, by a rotating cast of thrash legends, who tonight include current and former members of Overkill, Machine Head, Exodus and Sepultura, among others.

Former Anthrax frontman John Bush is the first to bring the noise on vocals tonight with *The Accuser*, a blisteringly fast and heavy track that wouldn't be out of place on the classic albums in the discographies of those onstage. One song later, he introduces the towering Chuck Billy of Testament, who grins contagiously as he commands the crowd to "Get those horns up!" before bellowing his way through two more MA originals.

Overkill's Bobby Blitz then joins the party for covers that range from his own band's *Wrecking Crew* to Priest's *Rapid Fire*, but the bar is raised even higher as Mastodon's Brann Dailor and Troy Sanders team with Ellefson and

Chris Poland for a knockout rendition of the 'Deth classic *Wake Up Dead*. Later, John Bush returns to lead an inspired take on Rainbow's *Kill The King*, but it's a song from his own past – Anthrax's *Only*, backed by a massive four-guitar wall of sound – that's the true pot of gold. James Hetfield once called it the perfect song, and hearing it tonight, who's to argue?

After the main set wraps with an inspired *Pledge Of Allegiance*, there are hugs, fist-bumps and high-fives all round, before the encore serves as the show's true Endgame moment. After Gary Holt helps Chuck slay *Damage, Inc.*, most of the evening's musicians – five guitarists, four bassists and two drummers in all – join John and Chuck for a curtain call performance of Iron Maiden's eponymous anthem, a fitting finale for an anniversary celebration for the ages.

CLAY MARSHALL

Malevolence: Alex Taylor leads the cavalry charge



Pain Of Truth go on the offence

MALEVOLENCE

PAIN OF TRUTH / ROUGH JUSTICE

TRAMSHED, CARDIFF

Sheffield's groove aggressors enter hostile territory

DESPITE GENTLEMANLY RIVALRY and camaraderie being central themes to rugby's appeal, international matchday on a Saturday in Cardiff is still afflicted with an undercurrent of hostility, brewed by equal parts tribalism, competitiveness, testosterone and far too much alcohol. Subsequently, an evening walk through the streets already wet with rain, spilled pints and chip sauce is a sufficient warm-up for an evening of prodigious hostility and more violence than seen earlier in the sporting arena. Owing to their gratitude for being on their first big tour alongside their Sheffield kin, the sincerity and politeness of frontman James Tippet is at odds with **ROUGH JUSTICE**'s abrasive charge. Long Islanders **PAIN OF TRUTH** have become darlings of their local scene, and given their most uttered words are "hardcore", "New York" and "Pain Of Truth", their adherence to the traditionalist tropes seem to give the crowd incentive to prove they're worthy hosts. A bulging mix gives the likes of *Lifeless On The Ground* an even more confrontational edge, with crowd members either accepting the mic from frontman Michael Smith or mercilessly flailing fists and kicks into one another.

It's been a couple of years since **MALEVOLENCE** visited Wales, and the delight at the reunion from both crowd and band is

palpable. Incessantly enthusiastic frontman Alex Taylor and bassist Wilkie Robinson seem intent on bouncing around every square inch of the stage, revelling as the pits get ever larger and security struggle to cope with the exponentially increasing tide of crowd-surfers. The Tramshed's notorious sound demons rob the opening one-two of *Malicious Intent* and *Life Sentence* of their impact, yet by the time *Waste Of Myself* gets into its swaggering stride the venue is positively shaking.

While there's much love for their breakthrough debut, the setlist comes entirely from 2017's *Self Supremacy* onwards, highlighting a band growing in stature, confidence and skill. Never is this more apparent than during *Higher Place*. Standing completely at odds with everything else on show, the token ballad nevertheless elicits the most rapturous communal singalong by all – except for a few well-known local metallers at the back paying no attention throughout. Even Charlie Thorpe's short drum solo doesn't seem at all incongruous, paving the way for guitarist Konan Hall's idiosyncratic bellow to ring out over deafening closer *On Broken Glass*. It's another successful chapter written into the chronology of a band whose momentum and live reputation shows no sign of abating.

ADAM BRENNAN

BAEST

ANCIENT RIVALRY

THE BLACK HEART, LONDON

Warming up tonight's eager crowd is **ANCIENT RIVALRY**, death metal newcomers with hardcore roots and just one self-titled EP to their name. They crash through a blistering cocktail of Morbid Angel-esque tremolo and ultra-guttural vocal attack, setting the scene for the headliners with sufficient brutality. "Holy shit, it's steamy in here," growls Baest frontman Simon Olsen to a rammed crowd before pausing for a gasp of air. "There's all sorts of fungus hanging from the ceiling." The Danes get right into an insanely tight hour-long set of death metal groove that hardly lets up, where the crowd are as much part of the show as Baest's expertly conducted blasts of noise. From the stop-start failing-engine chug of new single *Colossus* to the Bloodbath-style assault of *Meathook Massacre*, a committed circle-pit is up to the challenge, limbs flailing even throughout the eight-minute single *Ecclesia*, with its quieter leitmotif and all. When the strobe lights stop flashing and closer *Necro Sapiens* rolls around, it's time for an unexpected sing-song. With a commanding stage presence equal parts charged and composed, Baest have earned an appropriately feral reputation for their high-energy shows. Tonight makes it clear why.

TAMLIN MAGEE

LLNN

SUGAR HORSE

DOWNSTAIRS AT THE DOME, LONDON

Bristol's **SUGAR HORSE**, aka "the loudest band in the world", are a curious proposition, blending the spacey melancholia of *Disintegration*-era Cure with the grinding mechanical noise of *Vertikal*-era Cult Of Luna. They also, quite spectacularly, do not give a fuck, using around half their allotted set time to play their nihilistic 20-minute single *Truth Or Consequences*, *New Mexico*. Such a baller move from a lesser support act would risk losing a crowd, but everyone in the room this evening is simply enthralled. **LLNN** vocalist Victor Kaas emerges alone performing *The Horror*, a sort of Fear Factory-style mechanised cyber haka. But better. The band slowly emerge as the song comes to an almighty climax, before they kick things up another notch and obliterate the room with a black hole-creating rendition of *Imperial*. Unbelievably, this is the Danes' first ever headline show in the UK, despite having formed almost a decade go. Next time they come back, they deserve to be playing the Dome's much larger room upstairs... if the sound system can take it, that is.

REMFRY DEDMAN

Periphery have set their dials to dazzle



PERIPHERY

ROUNDHOUSE, LONDON

Washington DC djent mavens undergo a bold visual makeover

THE LAST TIME Periphery headlined in the UK, it was a showcase as barebones as a compound fracture. The Washington DC djent darlings topped the bill of Manchester's Radar festival last July, but didn't bring the pomp you'd expect for such a spot – not even their own backdrop. As a sold-out crowd huddle in the Roundhouse and see a stage where light tubes rise up and out from the drum kit, though, it looks like tonight will be anything but stripped back.

In fact, from the word go, Periphery demonstrate every strength that's lifted them from MySpace riff nerds to world-renowned prog metal favourites. Opener *Dracul Gras*, despite being pulled from last year's album *V: Djent Is Not A Genre*, flaunts each of this band's age-old tricks. The three-guitar attack of Misha Mansoor, Jake Bowen and Mark Holcomb leads the charge with

Meshuggah-esque polyrhythms and brutality. Meanwhile, vocalist Spencer Sotelo hops from roars to melodic yet gritty singing. Despite the frontman's claimed voice issues, the band continue to walk the line between the infectious and intense.

Periphery's signature humour – as demonstrated by the title of that recent album – also shines through all the pinpoint precision. Misha's wearing a t-shirt that states 'PERIPHERY SUCKS!', while tonight's first song is about "a fat-ass Dracula", according to Spencer. It's an engaging display of personality that makes the audience feel further invested in the show, and between the near-constant moshing and jumping of these 90 minutes, Mark finds space to play rock-paper-scissors with a fan to see if they can win one of his plectrums.

As special as such moments are, it's the total upgrading of Periphery's

visual presentation that impresses the most. *Wildfire* further propels the evening's momentum, and it's not just because that chorus is one of the best this bunch have ever crafted. After spotlights flash in time with every contorting rhythm, sparks rise from the stage and CO2 cannons shoot smoke to the ceiling.

Spencer also finds time and the vocal fortitude for a more dulcet experience, performing *Scarlet* with virtuoso guest Mike Dawes doing his signature fingerstyle on acoustic guitar. It's yet another signpost showing how far Periphery have come since their early days, mimicking their tech-metal idols alone in their bedrooms. Headlining the Roundhouse is a new landmark for Periphery, but the band are still growing, and it doesn't look like we've seen the apex of their climb just yet.

MATT MILLS

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Some of the venues you played in support of last year's *Terrasite* album were 1,000+ capacity – impressive for a band as nasty as Cattle Decap! Was it your most successful year ever?

"2022 was the worst year on record personally, but it ended rather amazingly with the band playing our first arenas opening for Amon Amarth. It set the tone for 2023, which was nothing but insane shows on the heels of our new album."

How did Cattle Decapitation blow up to the point of playing arenas?

"I don't know that there's any real answer. For lack of a better example, I've been calling it 'the *Doom* EP effect'. It's not that Job For A Cowboy's 2005 *Doom* EP was this magnificent piece of art; what I witnessed was a band receiving a benefit of 'timing' in the form of a fucking golden key to the city. Them and Suicide Silence exploded, and it appeared to be from a generation of kids where it hit them all at a certain time in their lives and just popped. We're seeing it again now with this... what, third wave of deathcore and this 'new wave of old school death metal.'"

2019's *Death Atlas* grieved the end of the world. Where did you even start picking up with *Terrasite* after that?

"Bug monsters! [See the human/cockroach hybrid of the cover.] *Death Atlas* is our most important album musically, but *Terrasite* blew the doors open from all that misery to finally have some fun concept-wise and some slightly more upbeat bangers."

Your 'unclean' melodic vocals are pretty legendary at this point. What does it take to maintain that voice?

"A warm-up I learned from Trey Anastasio from Phish – he uses a straw that you put in about three inches of water in a bottle, and you blow into it while doing this really dumb high to low and back again spectrum. People just aren't used to hearing vocal melody over a wall of 'blackened progressive deathgrind' or whatever the hell you call this stuff!"

"I DON'T KNOW THE ANSWERS BUT I SURE DO A LOT OF BITCHING"

FIVE MINUTES WITH **TRAVIS** **RYAN** **CATTLE** **DECAPITATION**

Extreme metal's most presciently pessimistic band talk bug monsters, betrayal by Metallica, and playing arenas with Amon Amarth

WORDS: PERRAN HELYES



Does it excite you to sneak these experimental elements into death metal records?

"Since the beginning, I have always wanted to subvert the death metal paradigm. I'm considered by some to be a death metal elitist, but in the early 2000s we were pariahs of the local death metal scene. I feel we're now relishing in the fruits of our labour."

How much of your lyrical content should be taken as literal calls for social and political action, versus leaning into the bleakness for extreme artistic expression?

"When reading the lyrics, you'll see that I mostly use the words 'we' and 'us' when describing humans, adverse interactions with the planet, its resources, its organisms. I've never claimed to know the answers, but I sure do a lot of bitching and complaining. I can't say there's a direct anything in there, other than a disdain for our species."

Now on your eighth album, you're more popular than ever. How did you manage to avoid being one of those bands who are defined by their first few albums?

"In this manner, Cattle Decapitation are truly an anomaly. In the late 80s through around 1992 or so, I was one of these 'the first four albums' kind of guys. *The Black Album* was absolutely ruinous to the way I viewed bands and music at the time, as I just wanted to hear things get faster and more aggressive. It told me that you may one day feel that your heroes can just turn on you and put their middle finger right up against your face, while smiling all the way to the bank."

Do Cattle Decap get much of that?

"There definitely are a few out there who feel that's what our best stuff was, but they're practically silenced by the fans of our last 10 years of output. It's one of the reasons we don't play the old stuff live anymore – the crowd dies down when we do. Getting older is a trip, but seeing your band rise and do what you always wanted to do as a young adult adds considerably to the mindfuck that is aging. I thank you all from the depths of my heart, from the superior section of its aorta to its distal, inferior ventricular counterpart. May you survive everything that's coming." **H**

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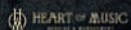
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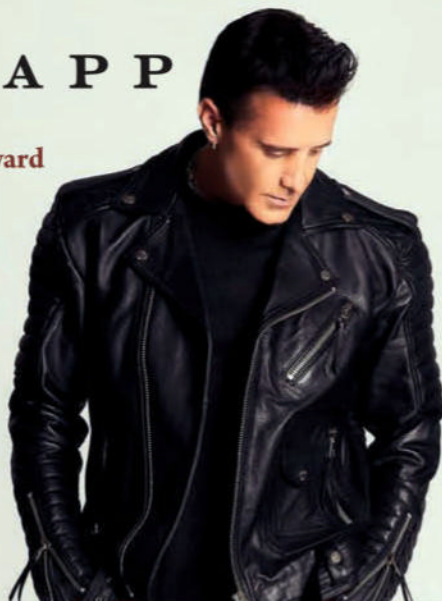
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